Thoughts on Learning Baguazhang

Michael Babin

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As an instructor and writer, I try to provide something for everyone.

For those who are only happy finding fault,
I have generously included a few errors to meet this need.

I also have a sense of humour and refuse to curb that tendency
just to appear more scholarly. Bagua is too serious a subject
to not take a light-hearted approach to the training.
If there were fewer humourless obsessives and fanatics
in the world today—there would be no need to study
the martial side of Baguazhang or any of the combative arts!

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A special thanks is due to Erle Montaigue. If in the last decade I have finally begun to understand what "internal" can mean in the the context of bagua, it has been largely due to his instruction, example, and encouragement.

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Ottawa, Canada
February 21, 2004

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Introduction

I remember a conversation many years ago with one of my sons, then twelve, who asked me in wide-eyed innocence if I had wanted to be a bagua teacher when I was his age. He couldn't understand why I then laughed as hard as I did when he asked his question and looked surprised when I explained that at his age, as a French Canadian in early 1960s Canada, I hadn't even heard the word, much less known what it meant.

Although times have changed and more people than ever before know that such a discipline exists, few have any understanding of how hard it can be to do any traditional version of that art really well. So, what is Bagua about?… Well, like any traditional internal art, it is about whatever each individual instructor brings to it within the broad framework that runs the gamut from being a harshly effective martial system that builds health through hard work and efficient body mechanics to New Age nonsense in which walking in circles while chanting neo-taoist prayers and wearing archaic costumes is the whole of the practice.

Good bagua, no matter what its style—and there are many—emphasises balance and relaxation *(sung)*, the development of twisting strength and whole body power, as well as the use of the mind to create intent, both for healing and martial purposes. The solo aspect of its circular practice can be strangely beautiful, full of graceful twisting movement, sudden stops and changes of pace and direction, swooping and lifting actions, as well as explosive movements.

The solo aspect of walking the circle while holding various postures or shapes is designed to train the body in different ways—more on that in later chapters—as well as to be meditative, which can help to strengthen and heal the emotions and the spirit. Walking by yourself or with partners can be a very beautiful experience and very demanding physically. In addition, as the exercise physiologists are now telling us with new-found fervour, walking at a moderate pace is one of the best exercises for the body in terms of strengthening the cardiovascular system without straining the joints the way that running can.

The traditional combative aspect is without sporting elements. It was designed to incapacitate or maim in an era in which firearms were still rare and fights usually involved more than one attacker. It is also important to remember that many of the early tactics were

designed to be used against opponents who might be wearing some form of body armour and were heavily armed with staff, spear, sword, knife, and any of a host of traditional weaponry. In fact, many of the tactics that come down to us in the forms are designed to lock-up and throw the opponent rather than strike targets that might be protected from a punch or palm strike by leather or metal armour.

Most defensive and offensive movements are done with the open hand. The energy generated by the twisting of the torso combined with literally throwing your weight around in a controlled manner is expressed through the open hands to strike, control and/or throw the opponent; the weight of the body stays on the back foot when walking in a circle, though not necessarily when doing postures within each change. The steps are rather tight, the knees staying in close proximity one to the other. Kicks are normally aimed low, at the shins and knees, to distract the opponent and leave his torso more vulnerable or to trap the lower body to make it more difficult for the opponent to evade.

This martial effectiveness was refined by the many early practitioners who earned their living as bodyguards and merchant convoy escorts. Those with no skill literally didn't survive to pass on what they had practised, which was good for the art, if not for the unfortunates whose martial skills didn't live up to their hopes and expectations.

In the end, the combative essence of bagua is learning to change spontaneously to deal effectively with the tactics of an opponent. The smaller student learns to evade attacks and counter-attacks almost simultaneously, while the larger person learns to immediately invade the attacker's space by battering his way through the attacker's arms.

FINDING A TEACHER

Like many North Americans, I first came to the martial arts as a young man because I was not particularly athletic and wanted to learn how to defend myself (the latter seemed important, as I combined the worst attributes for personal safety—a big mouth and slow feet!) Unfortunately for my dreams of being another Bruce Lee, I soon realised that arts like karate and jujitsu involved a great deal of hard exercise and more than a few bruises.

I wanted mastery of something that was reputed to be effortless and more than a little esoteric. Bagua seemed to fit the bill but, when I couldn't find a local teacher of that art in the mid-1970s, I picked Taijiquan by default. It took me almost a decade to learn, the hard way, that taiji, when done well, only looks effortless. When I finally started learning bagua and hsing-i in the early 1990s, I quickly relearned the same lesson—nothing is as easy as it looks to an outsider if done properly.

Similarly, it should be obvious, from a common sense perspective, that the best way to learn is to study with someone with the personal skill and the ability to transmit how he or she achieved that understanding, and who is willing to do so with you. There is really no substitute for this kind of apprenticeship, ideally on a one-to-one basis, but more often in a group setting.

A teacher is not someone with a great uniform, or who can do a seemingly endless variety of forms, or who can push you around by using tricks of leverage or through your own gullibility. It is true that training safely can sometimes make it difficult to weed out the experts

from the poseurs. However, even without worrying about the many frauds trying to get your money or your loyalty, it is not easy to define competence when you are a beginner, as almost everyone is better than you in most ways. However, time and effort bring increased competence, and with a few years of experience (assuming that you are studying something valid to begin with) it should start to be easier to sort out the outright frauds from those who have some level of competence.

How does one find the real masters in the mob of wannabees and poseurs? It is sadly true that quite often those with the most grandiose claims and visible profiles are the ones with the least depth of knowledge. I doubt that the famous P. T. Barnum was thinking of bagua students when he wrote, "There is a sucker born every minute!"—but he would have been correct in many instances.

However, the longer and the harder you train at a competent style, the more difficult it can be to find better role models, much less exceptional ones. Not many students are willing to travel to workshops given by other experts in other cities, or even just to buy their videos for comparison purposes. This is sometimes due to lack of time and financial resources and sometimes to the kind of blind loyalty that drives students to think that it is disrespectful to their teacher to look elsewhere for inspiration.

It bears repeating that it is essential for an intermediate level student to make the effort to compare what his or her instructor is doing with the skills and styles of that person's peers in the the internal arts world. It is easy to be happy as a big fish in a small pond, and you have to make some effort to compare notes with your peers in the ocean if you are serious about your interest in becoming really competent!

Let me offer some suggestions as to how to define the elusive quality of mastery in your chosen role model(s). These opinions certainly reflect my experience with Erle Montaigue, who has been my main bagua teacher, but are equally true of those few other gems that I have experienced over the years. A master is content to offer his or her own thing without being overly defensive about his or her interpretation of the art and without being too critical of those who do things differently. He or she can actually do what they say they can. This may seem simplistic, but there are many supposed experts who "can talk the talk, but cannot do the walk" unless they are demonstrating on their own students. A master has a strong foundation in traditional internal arts and continues to develop in a way that is a reflection of his or her foundation. He or she is someone with a normal life and interests (family, vocation, hobbies) whose bagua is an aspect of their life—not their whole existence. A master is someone whose forms and training methods can eventually teach you the same skills. In other words, their understanding is replicable and not just a unique expression of their skill, experience, and personal genius.

On the other hand, you often meet teachers hooked up to a respectable lineage who are mediocre in their personal skills or their teaching abilities. Having had a famous master, now long-dead, will not automatically make you anything special. The problem lies in finding a balance between learning material that has some resemblance in detail and agrees in principle with what you see being demonstrated and taught by other good representatives of that art. Of course, this means that the observer has to have enough experience and skill

to tell the difference between a fraud, a mediocrity, or a genius. So, being a beginner is not easy in any sense of the word.

Oh, and the height of mastery is that you don't act like a master and expect others to treat you like one. Many instructors are willing to be worshipped by their students; others are slowly seduced into thinking of themselves as special because of the adulation they receive. Some instructors tread the fringes of exploitation by misrepresenting just how advanced their skills are—when they are really skilled only in a hard style and teach one bagua form as a sideline, or by forcing their senior students to teach beginner classes for free, or by having grading systems that call for frequent and expensive tests.

Sadly, a few have no problem with ethics. They dispense with them altogether and take advantage of their students in a number of reprehensible ways. Here are some examples. A local instructor who taught women's taiji and self-defence classes to beginners told them that they could learn to project *Qi* (internal energy) to disable a rapist from a distance. A local self-proclaimed grand master used to tell his students that he could not train with them because his *Qi* was so strong that he would rip out their muscles if he touched them.

It was a little easier in the good old days to know if an instructor had skill, at least on some level. The other local martial arts instructors would visit and offer politely, or otherwise, to beat the ▰▰▰▰ out of him. It is difficult to fake competence at the martial aspect of bagua when a stranger is doing his best to punch, humiliate, or throttle you.

It is also sadly true that the majority of instructors, whether here or in China, rise to a certain level of competence, or incompetence, and then never change, no matter how many years they continue to practise and teach. It seems to be human nature to believe that you know it all and changing your approach is not easy, especially if you do have some skill and have had good instructors.

In general, the fewer people involved, the less chance there is of serious errors being introduced. Think of it like this—would you rather own the master recording of a symphony done with professional equipment or the copy you made from the bootleg copy somebody else made with amateur recording equipment? Even with the highest skill and best intentions, some changes occur every time a form is learned by a teacher and subsequently passed on to his or her disciples for further transmission.

To make it worse, modern bagua is burdened with endless bad copies of bad copies. A student learns from a reputable instructor for a few months or years and then, without his or her blessing, goes off to teach students who do the same after an equally inadequate apprenticeship. The original form becomes riddled with errors, or changes are made for all the wrong reasons. Similarly, many recent immigrants from the mainland are now teaching the wu-shu versions of bagua that they learned as a requirement for being a martial arts sports coach at one of the Chinese colleges. While such forms may be a decent introduction to the art, learning and practising one form hardly makes you an expert in a system!

A good style should provide the material for a lifetime of research and practice. A mediocre or beginner's form should be discarded when the time is right to do so. It is in your best interest to make a real effort to search for an original "document" that suits your physique and temperament. Leave the mutilated texts where they belong—on the shelf.

My own main bagua instructor, Erle Montaigue is, in case you haven't done much reading or exploration on the net, a controversial figure. Many deride his abilities and internal arts pedigree, although rarely to his face or if they have seen him perform in the flesh. As far as I am concerned, he is the "real thing" in internal martial terms—a middle-aged expert who seems to get better and healthier every time I see him, and whose fighting skills are harshly effective compared to what passes as martial competence in many versions of the modern internal arts.

Erle has personally instructed and corrected me in my performance of all of the basic forms and methods of his bagua at annual workshops that I hosted for him in the early 1990s. He authorised me to teach those forms and methods in 1994, and I have been teaching that art at my Studio ever since. I have also done workshops with several other experts in this art and have studied a large variety of bagua instructional videos, books and magazine articles in an effort to understand the art better.

As those of you who have been studying with me for some time will know, my understanding of what I practise and teach is constantly changing and evolving. This can be confusing and frustrating for everyone involved, but that is also an important aspect of the process of growth. While I tried to follow the example and teaching of my various teachers, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that—for good and bad—what I practise and teach has the stamp of my own personality and experience.

However, I have done my best to stay true to the spirit and discipline of Baguazhang in terms of my own practice and teaching. It is important to remember that this was an accepted tradition in China—you brought the valid parts of your previous training to your bagua. For example, the Gao Style has been strongly affected by the competence of its early exponents in hsing-i.

If you don't have a competent instructor in your area, then give one of the basic tapes available through Erle, or other teachers, a try. It is possible to learn something at a basic level from a good tape, especially if you develop or have the motivation to eventually get some corrections from him or from another competent bagua instructor.

VIDEO/DVD INSTRUCTION

The saying "the self-taught individual has a fool for an instructor" is often sadly true. However, it is equally true that a beginner without access to a competent teacher can learn something from such instructional tools—if they are geared to beginners. Similarly, studying any good instructor's videos is a legitimate, if challenging, way to improve your understanding of what you learned from him or her while in class.

However, if you have experience in another martial art or modern taiji style, it can be easy to convince yourself that you immediately understand most or all of the bagua basics being taught either in class or on a video. Such arrogance is usually self-defeating. Look at it this way—even though both activities involve knowing how to skate, is a hockey player also automatically qualified to be a figure skater, and vice versa?

Proper study goes hand in hand with frequent review, especially of the material you think you already know. I have found errors, small and large, in my efforts almost every time I

have reviewed material I thought I had understood. It is not making mistakes that is problematic—we all make errors with new material—the real error lies in failing to correct the mistakes you know about, from arrogance or plain laziness.

Once you have some real knowledge, it is very useful to watch and study as many videos by as many different instructors as possible. This allows you to compare notes on the different ways of interpreting what you are learning.

Unfortunately, many of the instructors making videos are doing so specifically to augment their incomes and are less concerned about an accurate transmission of what they teach than they would be with their own students. However, it is equally true that the majority of those buying videos or DVDs will watch them once or twice and then relegate them to a shelf without ever trying to practise, much less master any of the forms and methods shown.

As in all things, not all tapes are created equal, and it is not always possible to identify a bad video until you have wasted both your time and money. It is important to remember that even a talented instructor can produce a video that is poorly lit, hard to follow, and needlessly repetitious. It is also sadly true that some instructors will purposefully include errors to the video instruction as a way of ensuring that those who study only the videos will be identifiable to those in the know if they ever meet them.

We tend to judge a product by its cost, and this is not always appropriate. A lengthy, high-priced tape may give you little of value while a more modestly priced, hour-long product delivers insights and tactics worthy of a lifetime of study. Similarly, don't automatically reject the tape produced by an unknown martial artist and assume that the one by the famous expert will be necessarily better—this is not always true.

When considering the purchase of a particular video, pay attention to whether it is a demonstration or instructional tape. A reputable producer or distributor will indicate which it is in the advertisement. The former are really only of use for comparison purposes, or if you have learned the material in person and need a record for home study.

You should also realise that a tape/DVD produced in China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan may be labelled as instructional when it, by Western standards, is hardly more detailed than a demonstration tape. It is important to remember that traditional teaching was often done largely in silence and by example. You copied the physical movements of the teacher to the best of your ability, and that was that until you were accepted into the inner circle of senior students.

If you are bewildered by the variety of videos available by mail, try to rent copies of the ones that might interest you before buying. Martial arts supplies stores as well as some New Age bookstores often rent instructional tapes. You can also read the reviews that sometimes appear in the martial arts magazines. Such opinions are not always impartial, but they are a starting point for comparison shopping.

You can learn a great deal if you study videos in a disciplined manner and then have the opportunity to get corrections or advice from someone who actually can do the forms and methods with some competence. It is much harder to fool yourself about your progress if, for example, I tactfully remind you that "your thumb doesn't go there" when you are demonstrating the Toad in the Hole Posture you just taught yourself from one of Erle's videos.

It becomes essential to review the tapes you have used at regular intervals even when you have a working competence in the material covered. If you are a relative beginner, as you learn to pay attention, you will find that you suddenly see aspects of the material you had never suspected existed when you first started. Perceiving, as opposed to just seeing, what is being demonstrated is even harder (for many years) than trying to copy it physically.

As you develop more skill and over time, you will probably go through a stage in which you don't think you are learning as quickly as you are capable of doing. For example, as adults, you are free to buy advanced videos and try to incorporate the physical differences between what I teach you, and what Erle is doing on them. Just keep in mind that you are stuck with my opinions and guidance, and I expect you to do as you are told when it comes to the forms and methods that I teach.

I don't want to be too discouraging, though, as for the intermediate level student—but not beginner—studying instructional videos can be an excellent learning experience. If you have a lot of aptitude, you can actually shave some time from your learning curve. However, you can also go off the track so much that you will undo all the real progress you have made since starting to learn from me. You will also find that there are a few overt and many subtle differences in the way I teach the forms and methods compared to what is on the videos. This is for a variety of reasons, and I make no apologies.

One last thing, please, do not borrow one of Erle's or another instructor's videos and copy them instead of buying a copy from the source. Infringing on copyright is illegal and cheapens the value of your efforts to learn. I know that many people today don't think of duplicating cassettes or burning CDs/DVDs as being theft, but—rationalise it all you want—doing so remains theft of intellectual or artistic property.

Learning from Books, Periodicals & the Internet

To put it simply, even the most heavily illustrated book is relatively useless for learning the basic forms and training methods. The essence of bagua resides in movement and not in static postures. These subtleties are impossible to capture through still photography.

Having said this, it is also true that illustrated books and articles are useful if used as a supplement to personal instruction. You cannot learn a set of movements from a book, but you can refer to it much more easily than to a video if you forget something from a recent lesson, or while you are in the middle of practising.

Similarly, the written word is indispensable for studying the philosophy, history, and theory of the art. Of course, it should also go without saying that it is easier to understand the principles of bagua in your head than in your body or spirit. It is not too much of a cynical statement to say that there are more armchair experts in the internal arts than in any other martial systems. Unfortunately, we have such a cerebral culture that many people confuse understanding something intellectually with understanding it on a gut level as a result of having lived through it.

Finally, I also continue to be amazed by the numbers of experienced students and instructors that I meet who have no real understanding of the history and theory of bagua and

know nothing about the state of the art or the current masters presently teaching in North America or the Orient.

How can you claim to be a serious student or instructor in any discipline when you have no interest in the background of what you teach? Would you buy a car from a salesman who said, "I don't know anything about this vehicle, but it sure looks nice, doesn't it?"

I recommend the following books. The first is available over the Internet through Paladin Press, and the rest through www.amazon.com if your local bookstore doesn't carry them or doesn't do special orders:

Baguazhang: Fighting Secrets of the Eight Trigram Palm
by Erle Montaigue, Paladin Press, 1999

Emei Baguazhang: Theory and Applications
by Liang Shou Yu, Yang Jwing Ming & Wu Wen Ching
Yang's Martial Arts Association, 1994

Ba Gua: Hidden Knowledge in the Taoist Internal Martial Art
by John Bracy & Liu Xing Han, North Atlantic books, 1999

Pa-kua: Chinese boxing for Fitness & Self-Defense
by Robert W. Smith, Kodansha International Ltd., 1967

I would add that there are good translations available in English of the original Chinese texts on the Circular and the Linear Forms that Erle teaches, and one such translator and distributor is Andrea Falk in Canada, who can be reached at http://www.thewushucentre.com/. These texts are useful for comparison purposes as they contain the line drawings that illustrated the original Chinese texts.

I would also heartily recommend buying the CD compilation of the defunct publication *The Pa-Kua Journal.* It is available at very reasonable cost and includes all issues published in the seven years it existed in the 1990s. Edited by Dan Miller, this was an excellent source for any bagua practitioner to research the historical and theoretical side of the art. It can be ordered through Plum Flower Press http://www.plumflower.com/ in the United States.

On the Internet, bagua sites are often self-serving means of advertising classes, workshops, videos, or books. And they also come and go, so I won't recommend any except Erle's website http://www.taijiworld.co.uk/. However, all you have to do is type "pa-kua chang" or "baguazhang" in any search engine to get more information than you can handle in an afternoon—or several!

It is also true that while there is a huge amount of interesting information on bagua and the internal martial arts available on the Internet; visiting the related chatlines and bulletin boards can be very depressing. Many of the conversations seem less like those between informed adults and more like those you overhear between teenage boys whose hormones are in overdrive; heated arguments about minor details of practice or who is legitimate and who is not.

For example, in these electronic forums, Erle has had more than his fair share of abuse, but then again, so have many other legitimate experts. He should take comfort in the knowl-

edge that experts like Sam Masich, Liang Shou Yu, Park Bo Nam, as well as Yang Jwing Ming and, I would assume, many others, well known and obscure alike, have been criticised or insulted through the anonymous safety of the Internet.

I would suspect that these forums act like the village well did in the Middle Ages in that the infirm, the idlers, and gossipers are attracted to gather around to trade stories and to make fun of those who are actually out working to support the village or are away fighting to defend it. After all, Internet forums are anonymous (if you choose to hide), and those you argue with or deride are far enough away (or mature enough) so that you don't have to worry about retribution—the intellectual equivalent of the schoolyard bully who threatens you while surrounded by his buddies.

A certain amount of arguing or teasing is fun at times, but it is also easy to have a board ruined for serious discussion or exchange because the more experienced practitioners stop posting out of disgust. Having said all this, it is also not a reference resource that you can easily ignore for researching the history and current affairs of the bagua and internal arts world.

A Final Caveat

By the way, Erle has produced many articles and books on the subject of bagua, and I will not try to repeat what he has written on the forms and methods he teaches. Much of what follows in the various chapters will be discussions of subjects and training methods I teach in my personal classes. Consequently, if you don't have experience in Erle's or anyone's bagua, you may find it somewhat frustrating and the descriptions vague or hard to understand. I am afraid I cannot do much about that.

As I said earlier, this is *not* a how-to-manual. Any good text on bagua is designed to stimulate thought and provide historical and theoretical background—not teach movement.

If you focus on bagua, practise regularly to the best of your abilities and invest a minimum of five years with me or another competent instructor; you should develop a real understanding of its principles and core methods as a self-healing and combative system. After that, your progress is limited only by your diligence, dedication and your willingness to seek out better instructors.

Finally, if one of my current or former bagua students is reading this, thanks for having studied with me—a good instructor needs good students to continue to develop as a practitioner and teacher. It is also true that there are almost as few good students of any internal discipline as there are good teachers.

Chapter One

Learning how to Learn Baguazhang

The name of this art (also spelled *Pa-kua Chang* in older English language books) translates as "Eight Trigrams Palm" in reference to the famous eight patterns of broken and solid lines used in the Chinese philosophical and divination text *I-Ching*. While the principles of bagua, and even its martial tactics, are often related directly to the text and various commentaries on this ancient book, I prefer to focus on the more mundane aspects of training in my classes, and this will be reflected in the pages of this little manual.

As with the other internal martial arts, there are an often contradictory variety of stories about its history. Although methods of walking meditation in circular patterns have been used for religious and meditative practice by various Taoist sects for centuries, notably in the monasteries of the *Er-mei* and *Wu-tang* mountains, historical bagua begins in the mid-1800s with a man named Tung Hai Ch'uan.

Born an impoverished and illiterate farmer, he went on to learn a variety of traditional fighting systems and eventually began teaching his distinctive approach while crediting others with its creation, in the grand tradition of the Chinese martial arts. What a modern person would call falsifying lineage was a common and accepted practice in China in the old days—as venerable was always better, and innovative martial approaches were always suspect. Particularly, but not exclusively in the Chinese internal arts, there is a long list of anonymous Taoist monks or mythical figures who are supposed to have transmitted the secrets of the various arts in dreams or through texts which mysteriously appeared on cave floors or in other unlikely places.

In any case, Tung likely synthesised his art from a variety of fighting and meditation methods that he had learned over the years. Indeed, Tung's greatness as a founder and instructor lies partly in his ability to adapt the principles and methods of his art to suit the temperament, physiques, and existing skills of his various students who were all experienced martial artists when they came to him for instruction. Although he taught relatively few, many of those went on to teach and modify, in their turn, what they had learned from Tung.

Today there are many different styles of baguazhang, and almost all of those available in North America trace their lineage back to him. The style I practise and teach came from

Tung Hai Ch'uan to Chang Chao Tung to Chiang Jung Chiao to Ho Ho Choy to Chu King Hung to Erle Montaigue and to me. It has been heavily influenced by the hsing-i training of Chang and Chiang and the varied expertise and experiences of those who have followed. I am not sure that Tung would recognise the details of what we do if he were to come back from the grave, but he would surely notice the spirit and the principles of what he taught.

Done properly and moderately, over the long term, bagua solo training will transform you and your health, often in ways that surprise you. However, I am not suggesting that you need to become more Chinese than a native to be able to practise and benefit from your training. There is an unfortunate tendency in Western beginners to want or expect exotic and mystical aspects to bagua training. I was discussing this with a colleague. His comment was very apt: "Too many of us spent too much time watching the kung-fu television series when growing up." This tendency among those looking for life's answers in cultures other than their own is often exploited by instructors who have confused wearing Chinese clothing and spouting pseudo-nonsense in a learned manner with developing real internal style skills.

THE LEARNING PROCESS

Learning any aspect of bagua is not simply a process of memorising physical moves and remembering their sequence, or of doing a variety of martial training methods with a partner or with your instructor—although those are certainly essential aspects of the training at any level of competence.

Learning this art is also, in part, a process of relearning the learning process itself. This is especially true for those adults who have settled into a comfortable lifestyle and lost interest in acquiring new habits. There is a saying that "education is wasted on the young," but it is also very true that the older student is already at a disadvantage compared to a younger beginner in bagua if he or she is grossly out of physical condition or very set in his or her ways.

For a beginner it is always preferable to have the best possible instruction, as it is easier to create good habits than to correct bad ones once they become ingrained. Unfortunately, good instructors, whether in China or North America, are almost as rare as good students, and everyone has to start somewhere. However, it is equally true that the average beginner will probably not be able to do more than crudely copy an instructor's movements whether those are of high or *no* quality.

Before you can copy your instructor, which is in itself the first step towards developing any real skill, you have to really see what he or she is doing. Until you can observe the subtle movements and the fine details of your role model's posture and body mechanics, you won't know it is possible to move in such a manner. The majority of beginners may look but cannot see what is being transmitted in any detail, subtle or otherwise.

At an intermediate level the student learns to refine his or her interpretation of the copied movements until they are automatic enough so that there is some mental energy available to work on the more subtle aspects (i.e., keeping the mind on the lower tan-tien; when to in-

hale and exhale, etc.). Once you meet a qualified and compatible instructor, stick with him or her until you have decided that bagua is not for you, a process which needs a few months of class time at the very least. Assuming that you stay for several years, learn everything you can from that individual before trying to find the next teacher. In fact, you should always wait a little longer—you may discover that your own arrogance had made the forms and methods seem easier than they really were.

However, it is also important to remember there are different ways to write a sentence that still provide the same information. I have seen and experienced many different ways to interpret baguazhang. Some are flawed. Few are completely without value, particularly for beginners.

I must add, though, that this is *not* true for those who wish to learn the self-defence aspects of this discipline. When you are learning skills you might have to use to defend yourself or your loved ones from real aggression, it is essential to have competent instruction from the start, particularly if you have never had any decent martial training in the past. It is easy for the many bogus instructors to fool their students if the latter have never been hit, in a fight, and have no experience at rough and tumble.

Whether for martial or health purposes, you must learn to be patient with your own progress without becoming too complacent about it. It is easy to give up if you feel that you have no aptitude for what you are studying, especially if you find it more difficult than you had imagined. In this regard, I have always valued advice I overheard Sam Masich, one of Canada's finest modern internal arts instructors, give someone at a week-long training camp of his that I attended in 1990. Sam's comment was, "You can correct almost anything, except lack of practice!"

For those who go the distance, you owe your instructor loyalty. This, however, should not be a feudal willingness to suspend your ethics or misbeliefs and do what you are told, no matter what. Rather, martial loyalty should imply an honest and mutual exchange and the willingness on your part to trust the instructor's motives and skills without losing sight of the fact that he or she is human. Good students are essential to an instructor. They challenge him or her constructively, ensuring that he or she continues to evolve as a teacher, as a martial artist, and as a person.

Sadly, some teachers become egoists, content to surround themselves with students whose only talents lie in flattery or hero worship. Perhaps, the Chinese were on the right track with the Confucian concept of loyalty which, though extremely strict and hierarchical, had a safety valve—if you successfully revolted against the Emperor, it was obvious that Heaven was on your side, and you deserved to displace the old dynasty. You can rationalise betrayal as with any form of human behaviour; but, in the end, loyalty is a two-way street. Both the instructor and the student must contribute to the relationship if it is to survive and help both to evolve as people and martial artists. By the way, I am not saying that the average student of today should grovel before a prospective instructor, shower him or her with presents, and hang around their front door day and night until accepted as a student. Such may have been appropriate in another time, another culture. It is not so appropriate today. It is very true that, at least for the first few years, the student who wishes to learn deeply needs the instructor more than the latter needs students.

KEY ATTRIBUTES FOR A STUDENT

Wanting to learn any or all aspects of bagua requires hard work and particular physical, mental and emotional attributes. It is difficult to reduce any aspect of this discipline to a few crucial items, but the following three are certainly right up there in their relevance to your training.

Learning to be Balanced

Balance has many interpretations. It is being able to stand as still as a post for several minutes even when supporting yourself on one leg; it is the ability to move slowly and smoothly or quickly with a broken rhythm without being double-weighted; as well as willingness to work at both aspects of bagua—self-healing and self-defence—so that neither predominates in your training and daily life. Unfortunately, for the state of the art, balance is most often interpreted as being purely physical and technical.

However, being balanced is not simply a question of how well you can move through a variety of complicated physical manoeuvres. Balance is also about redefining how you interpret relaxation. New Age versions of bagua to the contrary, your objective is not to eliminate muscle usage, but to loosen, align, and connect it into a whole body usage. For example, the spine and hips become as important in striking as the shoulder, elbow, and fist. The mental visualisation of using the palm is as important as the physical movements that accompany it.

For the beginner, always having your body weight supported by one, rather than both legs is the beginning of balance in physical terms. At first, it seems relatively simple to avoid having an equal distribution of weight on both legs. However, always having more weight on one leg than the other is hard work for the muscles and ligaments of the legs and hips.

Similarly, the frequent toe-in and toe-out movements that are characteristic of bagua are also difficult to adjust to, as our hips tend to lose some of their natural range of motion even when we are relatively fit. It is not easy to learn to safely use the Triangle Stance that is so common in our discipline. In the long run, strength and mobility and, consequently, balance improves, but for the first months?…

As well as understanding how important it is to avoid being double-weighted, the intermediate level practitioner must also usually relearn how to stand and move. The spine must learn to lengthen and compress subtly to aid in powering the movements. This allows for a greater ease of *Qi* movement along the Governing Vessel that goes up the spine in the back, as well as the Conceptor Vessel that goes down the centreline of the front of the torso to the lower tan-tien.

To put it simply, balance is eventually achieved by relearning how to be upright and connected, not straight and stiff. Eventually, the practitioner seems to move effortlessly through each posture, each form, and pays less and less conscious attention to its *specific details*. Progress in the technical performance of form is still important, but has become much less so than in the beginning.

Few become master practitioners, and move with the ease of an animal. Their movements seem as natural as taking a walk or going up a flight of stairs are for most of us. Sometimes they make mistakes or stumble, but such minor losses of balance are smoothed over and have no bearing on their innate ability. In general, such practitioners usually are not particularly concerned over how they look to observers. This is partly due to emotional maturity and also because they are able to recover so smoothly from a loss of balance that the mistake is difficult for the average observer to see.

By contrast, the beginner or pseudo-master is so concerned with his or her technical prowess that this preoccupation becomes a source of imbalance and tension that can diminish the quality of his or her practice. This is not to say that the ability to balance yourself on one leg or the technical beauty of your movements are unimportant. If you go too far in the other direction, you may develop an obsession with internal development that leads to other problems.

In contrast to the technical perfectionists are the New Age bagua players who are content to go through the motions, as if in a trance, while doing their forms with no technical precision or ability. The essence of the art is to unify and co-ordinate the spirit, mind, and body, and not let one predominate. It is not enough to imagine that you can stand effortlessly on one leg. Your body has to have acquired the strength, looseness, and body mechanics necessary to do so.

Balance requires that you persevere, as much because you enjoy the classes and solo practice, as because you are determined to improve yourself. With the right attitude, your bagua training becomes play of the highest order. It is a sad reflection of human nature that most students seem to find a grimly obsessive attitude and facial expression necessary to feel as if they are learning something of value. However, the best instructors I have had all shared one trait, and that is a rich, if often eccentric, sense of humour.

Being balanced also implies that you will shuffle your educational, work, family responsibilities to accommodate your training needs. Few adults can train with the energy of adolescence. Nor is it always possible to devote as much time as you would wish to your training—whether it is in class or on your own. Are you balanced in how seriously you take your training—neither training obsessively day and night, sacrificing family and friends, education or career nor being lackadaisical, training sporadically as the mood strikes you.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. You may plan to go to the evening class after supper on a regular basis, but find, after the novelty wears off, that the location of the classes is so far from home or work that commuting is exhausting. In addition, there is always a price to pay for everything in life, and your leisure time is usually curtailed to some degree when you are serious about your training.

This may be fine if you are single, but it will cause problems if you are not. For example, your girlfriend may not understand why her dinner party seems less important than your scheduled workshop, or your husband may not understand your sudden desire to attend classes three times a week and worry that it will interfere with his routine.

Studying bagua can mean doing what you think is right for you even if others don't immediately understand or support you. However, as few of us are reclusive monks living in

a mountain cave, we also have to remember the need for compromise. Erle Montaigue has often said that "you should train to live, not live to train." This is true, no matter what your age, especially for maintaining healthy relationships.

Being balanced also implies that you will practise both solo and two-person exercises. It is easy to convince yourself that walking the circle while holding the Eight Mother Palms or doing the circular form everyday will somehow bring effortless power and great self-healing benefits. It doesn't if that is all you have ever practised! To reap the maximum benefit from your daily practice it is essential to traine in all aspects of the art—not just the ones you find easy or enjoy the most.

Learning to Relax

Some of the people who enquire about classes at my Studio want to know if bagua is as relaxing as taijiquan is, incorrectly, reputed to be. They seem to find it problematic when I tell them that bagua is about stretching and lengthening, that this can eventually undo chronic tension, but that the practice is initially anything but relaxing!

The muscle tone and efficient body mechanics required in bagua are relaxing in the sense that real relaxation is related to creating postural integrity which encourages deep abdominal breathing, and loosens and stretches the body's connective and muscular tissue. In traditional terms, this encourages the *Qi* to flow in an unimpeded manner throughout the body.

In Western medical terms, rhythmic exercise, by the alternate contraction and relaxation of muscles, improves circulation and avoids or minimises the pain and fatigue caused by muscle tension. It accomplishes this primarily by dispersing accumulations of lactic acid, a by-product of chemical energy production in the muscles. It is also true, particularly for older students, that doing the form provides a weight-bearing exercise that can slow or prevent osteoporosis.

However, it is more likely that the first few months of classes will serve only to elevate the stress levels of the average beginner as he or she discovers that learning qigong or the fundamentals of form is not as effortless as it looks. Even with adequate and sincere instruction a novice is more likely to leave class tense and frustrated if he or she is unhealthy or unused to regular physical activity.

Patience, perseverance, good instruction, regularity and moderation in your personal practice outside of class time are particularly essential in the first few years.

Learning to be Adaptable

"The more things change, the more they remain the same," a trite, yet accurate saying that certainly describes the human reluctance to change even when we know it is in our best interest. And, with time, this can help us to understand that change is not necessarily our enemy—just another aspect of both our bagua practice and daily life.

While it is all too easy to move mechanically through the movements of form when doing solo practice, it is much harder to ignore the imperatives of changing your tactics when working with a partner. For example, if you don't modify a tactic that normally works on

someone at your own level of competence when practising with the instructor or a senior student, you quickly learn that the ability to adapt spontaneously to changing circumstances is as difficult as it is essential.

Similarly, on a personal level, to quote the late musician and cultural icon John Lennon: "Life is what happens while you are making plans." Trying to prepare for the future is, in some ways, as futile as trying to master techniques that cover every possible martial situation. What seems beneficial at first can prove to have been a curse, and vice versa.

Consider the old Chinese parable of the peasant whose only son wanted a young spirited horse to ride, not just the placid old mare that his family used to pull their plough. The mare ran away one night, which seemed a disaster for the family until she came back with a stallion that had followed it home. This seemed a blessing, until the spirited new animal promptly threw its inexperienced young rider, who was left with a permanently lame leg. This was seen as a curse until the government officials conscripted all the able-bodied young men and sent them off to war. The son was the only one allowed to remain at home while the other young men were marched away, most never to be seen again!

Learning to deal with change is a complex process, and even without trying to make it happen, becoming relaxed, centred, and spontaneous on a physical level is bound to have similar ramifications for your emotional state, and vice versa.

Setting Realistic Goals

A minority of gifted students, no matter what their age, will have one intuitive breakthrough after another in their training. However, most of us will only achieve a deeper understanding of ourselves and bagua, one element at a time, over the years.

The following strategies may help you make the most of your training and avoid injury:

- Decide what you want from your training, set progressive and realistic goals, and put them in writing. Break these down into smaller ones and assign them deadlines.
- Keep a daily training diary, even on those days that you don't train. (Studying the reasons why you didn't practise on a given day may help you determine patterns and counterproductive habits.)
- Expect setbacks. There may be weeks that you cannot train because of professional or work commitments. There may be minor or serious injuries that require a period of rest and rehabilitation. Long-term moderate effort is the ultimate key to being able to train for the rest of your life.
- Don't be too humble. Mastering a difficult technique or having a sudden insight into some aspect of your training should be acknowledged with pride.
- Don't be too proud. Keep your skills and accomplishments in perspective and identify those areas in your training which still need work and can be realistically improved.

Duration & Frequency of Training

The length of each of your training sessions and their frequency in your schedule are dependent on a number of variables: your own level of interest, physical ability, time constraints, and so on. It is certainly true that few modern teachers, much less their students, practise with the intensity that the old masters are reputed to have brought to their training. When reading about the master who would routinely practise walking the circle and forms under a large table so that he was forced to use and maintain very low stances, it is hard to believe that anyone today is capable of such intensity.

Few adults with families or occupations can match such training regimes. But it remains true that regular practice is essential to making progress, especially if your interest goes beyond doing this discipline as more than a set of physical movements. I find it difficult to be patient with the modern practitioners who obviously believe that doing a modern wu-shu variation of the Circular Form once a day somehow makes them superior in every way to someone who trains regularly and intensively in one of the external martial arts.

Modern research has shown that the traditionalists were on the right track about the morning and evening being the best times to practise. People are more inclined to skip scheduled exercise in the mid to late afternoon because of fatigue or busy schedules. However, high-intensity activity, like fast or fast/slow forms that require short bursts of energy are best done late in the day. You will feel stronger, perform more skilfully and get more out of your workout. For slower or steadier exercise, you will reap the same benefits whether you practise early or late in the day.

The self-healing and defence skills of baguazhang are gained gradually through moderate and balanced training. An internal martial art is difficult to cultivate through either obsessive or lackadaisical training.

In this way, the obsessive younger student may quickly develop martial skills but destroy his emotional and spiritual sense of balance; the older obsessive student may train too hard initially and burn himself out on a physical or emotional level. Conversely, the lackadaisical student trains only when the mood takes him or her and then overinflates the value of such training. It is very difficult for average students to learn the interactive side unless they come to a group or private class two to three times per week for several years.

The martial skills cannot be gained from training on an irregular basis unless you are already a very experienced martial artist or have a great deal of aptitude. Few fall in this happy category!

Age-Related Issues

I have not had any success teaching children, or teenagers for that matter. Even young adults, especially those with hard style martial experience, may have to give up much of what they have already learned to make real progress and are often reluctant to do so.

As to young and middle-aged adults, many come to bagua expecting that it is effortless right from the start because you are just walking in a circle. Several times over the years of teaching I have shocked would-be students who had done indifferent bagua elsewhere by

encouraging them to walk properly. The conclusion was usually: "That's a lot harder to do than what I'm used to, but it looks so easy!"

Athletically, men tend to peak in their late teens and early twenties, and it can be a shock to realise that you are not as young as you once were. The average older internal practitioner may have to modify the intensity of each session, or substitute a slower pace for a fast, or practise a different form as he or she gets older, but there is no legitimate age-related reason to stop completely. Such continuity is, of course, only possible if you practise a style that uses sound body mechanics. Allowing your knees to rotate out of alignment may go unnoticed when you are a fit 25-year-old but, in the long run, cause those joints to self-destruct when you hit 50.

Aside from using proper body mechanics in your training, it is also important to practise on a continuous basis. Stop all activity and training for a few months when you are past 50, for example, and it will be more difficult to safely resume your practice, especially if you are practising vigorous forms. The older beginner must come to terms with his or her strengths and limitations and consider what personal and lifestyle changes will be necessary to train safely.

You should consult with a physician before beginning to train in the interactive aspects, especially if you are over 35 and unused to physical activity. Heart and circulatory conditions are often without symptoms until the moment you have a heart attack or stroke during a warm-up. Similarly, it is difficult to begin bagua if you have an acute or chronic medical condition affecting your back or knees.

No matter what your relative age, you may have to go on a diet and improve your fitness levels before beginning the martial classes and pace yourself once you have begun to train. Of course, with proper stretching and progressive training any ability can be gained to a surprising extent even by the not-so-young beginner. However, he or she will have to be prepared to train more carefully and moderately than the younger students in the class. Human nature being what it is, you may find it very difficult to restrain yourself when everyone else around you is moving at high speed.

If you are practising intensively, as well as engaging in other demanding physical activities, I recommend taking one day off every week from your training. Older martial artists should not ignore the realities of an aging body and try to exceed their capabilities or rush their progress. Maturity and experience are assets that cannot be replaced, and most of the best instructors I have met in a variety of martial arts are middle-aged, not young adults.

Gender-Related Issues

In the good old days in China, there wasn't a problem caused by mixed gender classes—as there weren't any. Women learned only from their fathers, brothers or husbands if they were lucky enough to have one who was also an instructor. In more recent years, in government-run martial arts colleges on the Mainland, women experts teach form and qigong to women, but rarely the combative aspects of the art and rarely in a mixed class.

While gender restricted classes are sexist in modern Western terms, these circumstances avoid issues that often come up in Western classes, e.g., those looking for new romantic or

sexual partners more than quality instruction, and those men who feel that they can fondle female students under the pretence of having accidentally made contact during the various two-person exercises.

In regards to the latter, both sexes must be prepared for the intimacy of many of the two-person training methods and accidental contact with certain tender parts of each other's anatomy. To make this whole issue more complicated, arousal (as in the emotional and physical intimacy that can develop when training with a partner of the opposite sex) does increase the production of sexual hormones which can be refined through your training into martial or self-healing *Qi*. It is also just as liable to lead to something a little more intimately mundane.

However, I don't think that gender restricted classes are a valid solution, as this may eliminate some problems but create new ones. For example, some people are not comfortable with being touched by members of the same sex or, conversely, enjoy it very much indeed. In addition, in terms of developing self-defence skills, women are usually going to be at risk from a larger man as, sexual dominance issues aside, aggressors are often compensating for cowardice by looking for smaller victims. At least for some class time, women should practise with men to develop skills that might work against men.

Practitioners must also be prepared to acknowledge that they may well enjoy the intimate contact. Human beings are sensual and tactile by nature, and enjoying the feel of another person's body as you practise is part of the pleasure of training—like dancing with a good partner. It doesn't mean that you are debauched to feel this way; however, you mustn't carry it too far the other way either.

While it is not the only solution, it is an option for a female student to get into the habit of wearing one of the sparring bras that have plastic cups. Although to be frank, I find that very few women want to wear them in the same way that most male students ignore the common sense of wearing an athletic support and protective cup because they are not comfortable to train in.

It is certainly in the best interests of each instructor, from both a liability and ethical point of view, to outline to his or her students what is and is not appropriate when practising in a mixed environment. However, it is difficult to supervise a large group class as to what is too much or is a sexual contact. One person may be completely unaware of contact that might make another extremely uncomfortable.

As in most aspects of trying to adapt traditional methods to modern needs, it is not easy to avoid diluting the martial content of bagua as the easiest way of avoiding controversy. Instructors must be willing to be flexible. In the end, this may mean limiting the techniques practised in a group setting where supervision is spotty due to numbers, or ensuring that women work only with women and men only with men.

Investing In Loss

The famous taijiquan instructor, the late Ch'eng Man Ch'ing is reported to have often exhorted his students to make progress by "investing in loss." This can be understood in a variety of ways depending on your experience with the internal arts. Certainly, the easiest

way is to learn from your mistakes. For anyone who has tried to understand any aspect of bagua this is, perhaps, the hardest lesson of all, particularly when it applies to the various two-person drills where it is important to learn to evade as much as block your partner's attacks.

From a teacher's perspective it can be amusing to watch two students practising together if both of them tend to be defensive by nature. The temptation is first to refuse to acknowledge that you have made a mistake; then to look for someone else to blame; and, finally, come up with an excuse for why you failed. For example, your partner knocks you off balance and your first reply is "No, I didn't move my feet!" When you finally admit that you did lose your balance, the next reaction is often "My partner used too much force!" and the last bit of ego defense is likely to be "Well, I wasn't ready!"

To correct such tendencies, the first step is to recognise that there are things you need to work on in yourself that are hindering your progress. Seems like common sense, but it is amazing how many students have trouble identifying their problem areas. Sometimes they cannot see the problems; quite often they refuse to! Now, investing in loss is hard enough in solo work, but it gets harder still when someone is repeatedly beating their way through your defences, punching you, or pushing you vigorously into a wall.

In this case, it is almost impossible to rationalise your weaknesses—you either learn from them, refuse to return to that kind of training environment, or lose your temper and escalate the training to the level of "Oh, yeah! Take this!" All are counterproductive.

Skipping Stages

How do you know if you are skipping stages that might later prove to have had essential lessons to be digested? After all, it is easy (when you imagine that you have relevant experience) to think, "Right, enough of this intermediate stuff—as a genius I can leap from the first step to the highest." I know from bitter experience that every time I have convinced myself that I was finally an expert, I have discovered the hard way that something was still missing, and I could stand to get back to basics.

This is one of the few areas in which I would offer a gentle criticism of Erle's approach to making such a wide variety of video material available. Too much of it is aimed at the intermediate and advanced level practitioners, not enough at the beginner. In the beginning, a new student (no matter how much unrelated martial arts experience he or she may have) needs to focus on precision and the basics of bagua posture and body movement.

Instead, beginners tend to buy the advanced tapes and teach themselves the form shown at that level. The result is normally counterproductive for those practitioners' learning—especially if they don't have the constructive criticism of a live instructor on a regular basis.

Let me put it simply: a baby learns to turn over on its own. Then it learns to prop itself up on its forearms. Then it learns to sit up. Then it learns to crawl on all fours. Then it learns to stand holding onto the parent's hands. Then it learns to stand unaided. Then it learns to walk. Then it learns to run. Then the parents learn to hide all the breakables and dangerous objects.… A few genius babies can skip a few steps to physical independence, but the majority progress by learning in stages.

Perhaps, there is great truth to that old Buddhist and martial arts adage that "In the beginning a mountain is just a mountain. With study you realise how complex that seemingly inert structure is, and with even greater maturity comes the realisation that a mountain is just a mountain."

I suppose the occasional genius, or idiot, can skip that middle stage. Most benefit from experiencing it although many of those who bother also get stuck at that level.

Cross-Training for the Relative Beginner

I have met several karate and shaolin instructors who practise and teach bagua as a profitable sideline. And, in the vast majority of cases, their internal arts are anything but! Similarly, those students who have done yoga or meditation training of one kind or another or any of the New Age body/mind disciplines may spend too much time trying to compare what they are learning to what they already know (or think they know).

In many ways, it is more fruitful in the beginning to spend most of your time analysing how bagua is different from what you already know, rather than making assumptions about the similarities.

While I don't insist that you immediately stop training in any discipline or martial hard style in order to learn bagua from me, you will eventually reach a point when you must choose the path that best suits you. Human nature is such that the average student usually resists and resents this need to start over. I have been faced with such a need several times, and it is never an easy task on any level. There is a world of difference between baguazhang and taijiquan, not to mention Goju Karate, Hung Gar, or Wing-Chun.

If you continue to enjoy and practise the other arts as you learned them, it is unlikely that you will have the time or aptitude to do bagua the way it should be done as a martial art. Having said that, the average hard stylist may derive considerable health benefits from practising bagua qigong alone, even if they continue to practise their old martial disciplines.

It is equally true that you may have difficulty relating to the differences between what I teach and what you may have learned from other bagua instructors. Some of what you will be exposed to are simply variations of other valid interpretations and can be ignored. Sometimes, however, you will need to start from scratch, and this can be very hard on the ego if you have gotten used to thinking of yourself as an experienced practitioner.

Sadly, workshops are largely a waste of time in terms of an individual being able to benefit much unless he or she already has considerable skill and experience and takes an equally talented partner to train with during the workshop, to maximise that learning experience, and has someone to continue training with back at home over the following months and years. Too many martial artists are content to take endless workshops just to get a photo with, or a few memories of, the guest instructor—not to mention the certificates and t-shirts that they hand out at North American workshops. It is difficult to say which is better (in my experience, anyway)—having a beginner who is experienced martially or has no such experience. Those with hard style experience can be either the best or the worst of students, and this is equally true of those who come to class with a clean slate.

CONCLUSION

While some teachers and styles are better than others, there are many different valid approaches to bagua: some emphasise the health aspect, some emphasise the self-defence stuff, and some emphasise the competitive aspect of the art. As long as teachers have skill and bring some of that skill to their teaching, you will benefit, providing you practise enough to make progress and enjoy the practice enough to continue to do so.

My one caveat is that the teacher should have what one of my instructors told me his teacher had called (in broken English) "a good heart for the people." In other words, the teaching should benefit the students on some level, each according to his or her capacity, and not just stroke the ego of the teacher, or fill his pockets with money.

Speaking of money, there is an interesting Chinese expression which states that learning bagua or any internal art is like putting money in the bank—make a small deposit every day, don't make too many withdrawals, and you will reap the interest when you are old!

Chapter Two

Fundamentals: Standing and Moving Qigong

Practising *Qigong* (literally translated as "energy" or "work done with skill") is about loosening, relaxing and strengthening the body, restoring efficient body mechanics, and having a balance of *Yin* and *Yang* energies throughout the the body, and its energy system. Accomplishing this will also calm, strengthen, and unify your mind and spirit, and maintain an optimal amount of internal energy, as well as circulate it throughout the body for a variety of purposes.

Any physical or emotional injuries, as well as muscular tension, can impede or block the smooth and balanced flow of *Qi* within the body and affect the health in various ways. Fortunately, imbalances will often clear up on their own. *Qi*, like water, always seeks to balance itself. However, various methods can also be used to ensure the production of a normal amount of *Qi*, refine its quality and balance its circulation.

Practised with competence and over the long-term, any valid system of qigong, whether done as part of an internal martial system or solely as a health practice, is said to be good for the *Qi*.

I once had an e-mail message from someone who wanted to know if it was *Qi* he was feeling when he experienced a magnetic repulsion and attraction in his hands doing qigong.

I answered that this, along with trembling, feelings of warmth, tingling of the skin, and other sensory phenomena was a common manifestation of such training, but it was important not to confuse the symptoms of the flow of intrinsic energy with *Qi* itself. In the same way, the heat in an electrical wire is a by-product of the flow of electricity through copper or aluminium and is not the electricity itself.

Without doubt, long term qigong training can change the body, emotions, and spirit in a way that can be likened to refining crude ore into iron ingots and eventually, with further skill and effort, into high-grade steel. All three are manifestations of the same thing, lumps dug from the earth, but the final product shines beautifully and has much more use in daily life.

The process of refining makes the substance stronger and more flexible as a lump of iron ore, relatively inert and useless, becomes a sharp and flexible high-carbon stainless steel kitchen knife. Both are the same substance in essence, but one is the product of time and effort.

Qigong makes this refinement happen in a number of ways. Some are impossible to analyse empirically. Some make sense from a traditional Chinese perspective, and some make sence from a Western logical perspective. My own gut feeling is that deep relaxation and quiet attentiveness eventually encourages both hormonal and attitudinal shifts in the body. For whatever reasons, taking chronic tension out of the spine, the muscles, the fascia, and connective tissues, and learning to quiet the mind creates a powerful tool for change.

And now for the bad news.… This process also fuels, and is fuelled, by a general overhaul in your lifestyle. It is unrealistic to believe that you can continue to smoke; eat "garbage," abuse alcohol or drugs; get too little sleep; endure or provoke abusive relationships; work in an environment that stifles your body and spirit, yet counteract all this by doing the Circular Form or standing and moving qigong.

But through your training you may awaken to understanding that what you are doing is harming you. Every way, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, in which you change your lifestyle and attitudes contributes to the process of maturing; a process that seems to have stopped in many people.

Many of us think we want to get rid of our bad habits, but then discover that the process of change is frightening and disorienting. Radical change can mean the loss of attitudes or habits that define us as we are. It can also mean the loss of relationships as people react badly or uneasily to how we are changing.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GENERAL QIGONG THEORY

The following is a simplistic overview of a fascinating, complex and disputed subject. While you don't have to be an expert in qigong or Chinese medical theory to benefit from your bagua training, it can certainly help if you understand some of the key concepts.

One key concept in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is your body, mind, and spirit are all interdependent. They affect one another at all levels. An ailment of the mind will be reflected in the body. Similarly, any physical ailment must affect the emotions and spirit. This attitude, called *Holistic* in the West, is also seen in the interpretation given to the functions of the organs.

When you are in good health, your *Qi* is strong and abundant and flows smoothly to all parts of the body, including skin surface. If your *Qi* is blocked, or deficient in certain parts of the body, disease can more easily occur. Our basic, *Innate* or *Original, Qi* is inherited from our parents, and its quality is fixed and dependent on their heredity, health, and age at your conception.

It is impossible to change the quantity or quality of this *Qi* through qigong. However, you can positively affect the quality of the *Acquired Qi* that you create within yourself to, at

least partially, compensate for weak *Innate Qi*, or for *Qi* prematurely wasted through poor living habits.

Conversely, healthy living habits (clean environment; nourishing food and drink; good thoughts; avoiding or minimising excessive behaviour; maintaining supportive relationships) are essential for making real progress through your qigong training. Practising qigong of any kind should be seen as one of the mechanisms of living a healthy lifestyle.

According to TCM, *Qi* circulates through twelve main *(ching)* and eight extra meridians *(mei)* close to the surface of the skin. The former are each connected to major organs or regulate organic processes. The latter are storage reservoirs and major conduits for internal energy.

Three of the extra meridians are particularly important:

- The Governing Vessel *(du mei)* starts at the bottom of the torso, goes up the spine and over the top of the head to the upper palate.
- The Conceptor Vessel *(ren mei)* begins at the tip of the tongue and runs down the centre of the front of the body to the bottom of the torso.
- The Girdle Vessel *(dai mei)* runs around the waist from the area of the kidneys in the back to the navel. This is the only horizontal "power line" in the body, like a rope that ties together all the others that run vertically. This is why there are many qigong exercises designed to twist the waist. This is said to massage, open, stimulate, and strengthen this crucial vessel and all the organs in the middle of the torso.

In addition to the twelve meridians and the eight vessels, there are also numerous minor channels *(lou)* which, like capillaries in the circulatory system, carry *Qi* to the skin surface and to every cell of the body, especially to the bone marrow—which, modern medicine tells us, is a major player in the immune system. One of the main aspects of *Qi—Weiqi/Protective Qi*—is to act like an invisible buffer against infection and "bad *Qi*" entering the body.

The twelve meridians are said to consist of six pairs, each component having a *Yin* and *Yang* relationships. In the upper (or *Yang*) part of the body the three *Yin* meridians run from the chest to the hand, and the three *Yang* meridians from the hand to the head. In the lower (or *Yin*) part of the body the three *Yang* meridians extend from the head to the foot, and the three *Yin* meridians from the foot to the abdomen and chest.

Internally, each is connected to and named after one of the main organs of the body. Externally, each channel connects with the skin at specific hollows or the acupuncture points. Imbalance in a channel can manifest itself in its related organ and vice versa. For example, pain along the heart channel, one of the shortest, from the tip of the inside edge of the little finger along the inside of the arm to the armpit, can indicate a heart problem.

Although new points are constantly being discovered, the main points on these "power lines" have been charted for thousands of years. Good health depends largely on a smooth flow of *Qi* along the channels. This, in turn, requires the body and mind to be in harmony.

Yin and *Yang* is a way of expressing this idea of balance and constantly changing state of equilibrium.

The written character for *Yin* originally represented the shady side of a slope, and the term is associated with such qualities as cold, quiet, responsiveness, passivity, darkness, downwardness, decrease, and femininity. *Yang* originated as the character for the sunny side of the slope. It is associated with qualities such as heat, stimulation, movement, activity, excitement, vigour, light, upwardness, increase, and masculinity.

陰陽

Yin, Yang (Traditional Chinese)

Everything has both *Yin* and *Yang* qualities. It is the interaction between these two forces that creates *Qi*. If your *Qi* is in harmony, both *Yin* and *Yang* are in balance. Like the blood circulatory system, the *Qi* circulatory system supplies energy to every cell of the body. Any physical or emotional injuries or muscular tension, can impede or block the smooth and balanced flow of *Qi* within the body and affect the health in various ways.

The classical analogy compares *Qi* to water which always seeks to flow into and fill the low from the high.

Fortunately, blockages and imbalances will often clear up on their own as *Qi* always seeks to balance itself. When they don't, you go to a qigong doctor for advice or treatment. For example, a Chinese doctor will try to discover whether or not your kidneys are processing liquid wastes as they should, and if their vitality, or lack thereof, has caused the pain or weakness you are experiencing in your legs. If the pain is accompanied by related symptoms such as a lack of willpower and mental acuity this points to an imbalance of energy in the kidney and/or its meridian.

Modern experts tend to compare *Qi* to electricity in terms of its quality and function. This is as good an analogy as any for modern students, but *Qi* is no more definable in objective terms than any other subjective aspect of life.

Humans seem very fond of analysis and categorisation and, as a result, there are several major categories of Traditional Chinese Qigong: self-healing, martial, medical and spiritual. These broad categories can be approached from a Taoist or Buddhist, Tibetan, or even Muslim perspective. There has been much blending over the centuries, and many methods cannot be neatly pegged into only one category.

Any of these categories can be approached through passive or active methods. But, there is some crossover. Some methods of passive qigong do involve slow movements of parts of the body, and some forms of moving qigong involve moving the legs but limit movement in the arms and torso.

In recent years in China there has been a tendency to make qigong medicine, theory, research, and practice more scientific from a Western perspective and to divorce it completely from any association with the religious roots of the art. There has also been a concurrent boom in the amount of qigong practices available to the Chinese community and, through

the immigration of many qualified qigong teachers and video/DVD sales, to the Western public.

In addition, a wealth of traditional and modern documentation has been translated and released on this subject. Sorting through such a mass of information in English, let alone in Chinese, is difficult enough. It is even harder to experience and absorb it. Qigong and the internal martial arts seem to attract more than their fair share of students who would rather discuss and theorise over a cup of tea than practise with any intensity.

Qigong is a complex subject. Unfortunately for those seeking enlightenment on what *Qi* is and how to cultivate it, as one can see from the following comments of different experts, they are hardly unanimous in their opinions: "Do any method correctly and *Qi* will be manifested without effort." "You must follow 'the true path' to develop *Qi*." "*Qi* is not a mysterious force, you can practise safely on your own." "*Qi* must be cultivated with great attention to detail and under constant supervision, or you will harm yourself."

Such statements often tend to obscure, rather than assist, the process of investigation. In pragmatic terms, the therapeutic uses of acupuncture and acupressure on humans is well established in the Orient. Its successful use on a variety of domestic animals also indicates that *Qi* manipulation has a real effect.

However, scientific studies in the West and in China are inconclusive in regards to what is really going on in terms of healing. I remember watching a television documentary a few years ago in which two groups of volunteers were given acupuncture treatment, on the back, for the same chronic medical conditions. One group was treated with needles inserted into the requisite points according to the principles of TCM; the other group was told that they were also being treated with the same appropriate points, but the needles were actually inserted randomly on their backs. Both groups reported roughly the same amount of improvement in their respective conditions.

Despite studies of this nature, it is important to keep an open mind. It would seem to me that analysing the form and function of *Qi* is of less value than knowing if specific standing qigong practices will, in the long run, make you a healthier person on many levels. Do you have to be an expert on electricity and the inner workings of your electrical can opener to use one?

Many of the best instructors are fervent believers in the traditional approach to *Qi* and its cultivation. Others, equally respected and skilled, believe that the traditional approach has little relevance to modern students and that the benefits gained come largely through the physical benefits of the exercises. At some point, it is essential for the serious bagua student to research this subject and decide what he or she feels and what to incorporate in his or her training.

In the end, it would seem to me that cultivating internal energy, no matter how you approach it, is largely a question of having faith, good intentions, and of letting go of your doubts and preconceptions. Qigong is not a question of trying to master or control yourself, or your energy, or that of others. It is sad that you frequently come across such approaches. Many beginners are desperately seeking the ultimate truth, the ultimate master. They roam

restlessly from teacher to teacher, from style to style, looking for someone they can obey and idealise rather than learn from.

Those looking for medical cures or emotional security are especially prone to being exploited on many levels. The last twenty years have been a fruitful period in both China and North America for the proliferation of qigong "masters," and the Chinese government, in my opinion, is not altogether at fault for cracking down on certain qigong cults it views as dangerous. The history of China is rife with groups that started off relatively innocently and then became full-blown cults or agents of social revolution.

Leaving extremism of any kind aside, qigong experts rarely completely agree on details of their methods. However, the competent ones usually agree on common principles and are good examples of whatever they practise—emotionally and physically sound human beings with lives and/or families outside of what they teach.

REGULATING THE THREE TREASURES

Even with competent instruction and effort, a complex martial discipline like baguazhang is difficult to master. There are many aspects to co-ordinate. By contrast, the simpler standing qigong methods minimise the physical aspects of training, so it is easier to concentrate on the fundamentals of movement and posture in what is called *Regulating the Three Treasures:* body, breath, and mind.

Body

Even though the body doesn't seem to do much work aside from holding itself up in a relatively still fashion or moving simply in circles, it is actually relearning muscle usage and body mechanics. The spine is stretched, relaxed, and energised to easily and efficiently support the head and internal organs. The legs and hips are loosened, and their muscles and tendons are strengthened while the knees relearn to naturally provide shock absorption for the spine and head. Standing and moving are not as comfortable as sitting qigong and meditation, so you must concentrate on the principles of relaxation and body balance in order to do the exercises for extended periods of time.

In this way the entire body learns to use only the right muscles to do the task at hand—not too much effort, not too little. The torso and arms must, in particular, be relaxed. As the joints and body loosen, your internal energy is better able to circulate properly. Think of it as the *Qi* circulating through hoses which are often partially impeded by kinks of varying degrees. The energy inside cannot flow easily until these bends are removed.

As the lungs expand, the spine straightens, and the joints relax, circulation improves often lowering high blood pressure. However, even if you practise correctly, your legs and lower back may get quite sore at first. This is normal, especially if you are tense by nature or don't have strong legs. Last but not least, using a standing posture means there is less chance of getting drowsy. Similarly, keeping the eyes open reduces the chance of falling asleep and collapsing.

Breath

Deep abdominal respiration helps to ensure that more fresh air is drawn in, and more stale air is discharged with each breath. This produces a massaging effect on the internal organs which is conducive to better digestive, reproductive, urinary, and endocrine functions. With stronger diaphragm and abdominal muscles, blood circulation in the abdominal cavity is improved.

Inhale and exhale quietly through the nose while keeping the tongue pressed lightly up against the roof of the mouth. As you inhale, "fill" and relax the lower abdomen. As you exhale, compress the muscles gently to "empty" the belly. Don't try to keep your chest from moving, even though you want the breathing to feel as if it is centred in the lower torso. You want your entire lower torso to *gently* expand and compress. Imagine that you have ball of energy about the size of a cantaloupe co-existing with your organs, tissues, and bones in the lower torso.

Sinking the *Qi* to the lower tan-tien does not mean overinflating the lungs or swallowing air—you are not trying to become a human blowfish! Use only the process I just described (called *Natural Breathing*) in which you relax the lower abdomen when inhaling and contract the lower abdomen when exhaling. This should be a gentle and long-term process of relearning how to breath evenly, fully, and deeply. In this way you retrain the diaphragm to rise and fall over a greater range so that the lungs are used more efficiently. This augments the capacity of the lungs, while the improvement in diaphragmic movement also produces a massaging effect on the internal organs; thus, improving the functions of the digestive, reproductive, urinary, and endocrine systems.

It is quite common, as a beginner, to get quite gassy when practising, so don't get embarrassed if you belch or pass wind. Over the months, your digestive system will adjust, and this won't be as evident.

Mind

Although it is difficult to do, the conscious mind must be encouraged to give up its obsession with endless mental activity. The Chinese refer to it as a "monkey" because it is always scampering about being noisy and causing trouble. At basic levels, this does not mean that you go into a trance, hypnotise yourself, leave your body, communicate with spirits, or become superman. Just be attentive and connected to your breathing and to your external environment. Counting each slow, gentle exhalation is an excellent way of doing this, as is paying attention to the physical movement in the lower abdomen.

Some authorities believe that women should always concentrate on the middle tan-tien which is located energetically in the area of sternum/upper chest. Other experts say that women can use the lower tan-tien, except during their menses, when they should not practise or use the middle tan-tien temporarily. Others say that the best points to concentrate on for both sexes are *Yongquan.* These are the only acupuncture points on the bottom of the feet and are major gates for energy moving in and out of the body through the earth. They are located on the midpoint of the bottom of each foot.

Focusing the mind in different ways should be thought of as a precursor to mental emptiness which is a different state from being either thoughtless or of being brainless. This "attentive non-attentiveness," as I like to call it, is both therapeutic to the spirit and conducive to certain martial skills even though this is not martial practice per se.

BAGUA STANDING QIGONG METHODS

There are a host of standing qigong methods that are either unique to bagua or have been adapted for use from other qigong systems by various instructors. The methods listed in this manual are my interpretation of methods that I have practised and teach. Again, refer to Erle's books and/or videos for details on practice for those methods that come from him.

Quiet Standing (Wuji Posture)

The word *Wuji* refers to a Chinese philosophical concept. In Western terms you can compare it to the existential void that existed before creation or the big bang. It divided into the movement of *Yin* and *Yang* called *Taiji* (not to be confused with the martial arts that go by that name as well), and *Taiji* gave birth to the universe as we know it. The Chinese call this the "Ten Thousand Things."

To describe it in a more mundane manner, stillness leads to movement, which leads to stillness, which leads—you get the idea! Hence, the use of the Wuji Posture before and after more active qigong training methods and martial forms. It seems funny to most beginners that standing still and doing the minimum of physical work properly is the key to eventually moving properly—but there you are!

You can also think of running through the following list of key points as a sneaky way of getting yourself to stand quietly before and/or after completing a more complicated qigong method or one of the forms. Standing this way as an exercise in its own right is also a way of becoming aware, in progressive stages, of how gravity and bad habits (i.e., leaning back slightly, keeping more weight on one side than another) can affect the human structure as well as your bagua practice.

Tim Cartmell, an internal arts expert that I respect a great deal, suggests that standing this way for a few minutes when you first get up in the morning can be a way of gently encouraging your body to remember a posture that is structurally efficient and harmonious.

For a long time, you won't be able to remember all (or any) of these points when training on your own—don't worry about it! As in all aspects of your training, effort and ongoing practice are the keys. I have appended, where appropriate, the Chinese terms. Use them if you like as a memory aid. For the first few months you will only have the correct posture, if at all, when you are concentrating and correcting yourself on a conscious level; eventually it will creep into your daily life.

If going through this mental checklist while trying to stand accordingly, start with the top of the head and work your way down:

- lift the top of the back of the head as if it is suspended gently from the ceiling. Doing this properly will also assist in keeping the chin at the desired angle. (N.B. From a traditional perspective this is, perhaps, the most important of practice.)
- the forehead is smooth and free of furrows of concentration;
- the eyes are open but not focused on any details, near or far; look at the big picture around you;
- inhale and exhale quietly through the nose;
- the teeth and lips are closed, gently touching. Try to keep a slight smile on the face, as this encourages the many muscles in the face to relax. Many of us carry a surprising amount of tension in the jaw and facial muscles;
- the tip of the tongue is resting behind the two upper front teeth in gentle contact with the upper palate;
- the neck is straight and comfortable, especially where it connects to the centre of the skull; the shoulders are relaxed, and the scapula should feel downwards, relax and drop somewhat;
- the armpits (*kua*—"bridge") are relaxed and slightly rounded;
- the arms and hands are relaxed and long; the elbows only slightly bent as if you had a one pound weight held in each hand providing a gentle downwards traction to each limb;
- the palms are hollowed, the fingers long, relaxed, and slightly separated one from the other. The only exception is the thumb which should be held a little farther away from the rest of the fingers to form what is called the Tiger's Mouth;
- the spine is long and relaxed, especially between the shoulders (*ba bei*—"draw/pull the back");
- the sternum is empty as if you have just sighed deeply (*han shou*—"hold something precious"). The corresponding space in the upper torso feels comfortable and gently expanded, as if it was lifting gently away and up from the centre of the chest;
- the abdomen is relaxed. It expands as you inhale and compresses as you exhale;
- the tailbone is relaxed so that the pelvis is tilted very gently, and the area of your lower spine between the kidneys (*mingmen*—"Gate of Life") is able to relax;
- the crotch (*kua*—"bridge") is relaxed, and the perineum is lightly closed and lifted (*ming dang*—"close the inner groin");
- the legs are relaxed, the knees are almost straight;
- the feet are held with the heels together, while the toes of the feet form a ninety degree angle in relation to the direction you are facing, or are held comfortably parallel to each other. One of these methods will feel more natural to you, use it.

- the toes are flat, and the body's weight is evenly distributed between both legs. Sink gently into the floor, weight dropping into the centre of the sole slightly towards the heels.

Basic Standing Qigong: Holding the Eight Mother Palms

Standing this way is designed to create physical heat by bending the knees, which creates heat in the lower torso, said to be the receptacle of the lower tan-tien. The lower tan-tien literally means "elixir field," and is a term derived from the ancient Taoist alchemical experiments that resulted in gunpowder, liquid mercury, and a variety of metal alloys.

Their original goal in such research was to create potions and pills that could be used to create precious metals and bring physical immortality. Some potions ended up causing madness (one of the by-products of lead or mercury poisoning) and eventual death in many of the alchemists, as well as at least one Chinese Emperor (which led to the first major persecution of Taoists in China, but that is another story).

During their meditative practices, these Taoists also experienced an altered state of consciousness accompanied by sensations of warmth and movement in one or all of three tan-tien regions of the body: the upper, spiritual, centre behind and between the eyes, which coincides with the "extra" acupuncture point *Yintang*; the middle, emotional, centre in the centre of the sternum, which coincides with the point Conceptor Vessel #17; and the lower, physical, centre inside the torso, just above the pelvic basin, which corresponds with the point Thrusting Vessel #2.

The latter region is also commonly identified with *Qihai* (Conceptor Vessel #6), or "Sea of *Qi*," which is about three fingers width below the navel. This, of the three, is the most important as it also holds the internal organs and is the hub of many energy rivers. The lower tan-tien also said to be the root of the tree of life. And, if you don't take care of the roots, your tree is liable to be rotten inside, no matter how healthy it looks on the outside.

Heating the lower tan-tien by working the leg muscles causes chemical changes to happen in the body—like lighting a fire under a cauldron of liquids to cause steam to rise. You can think of it as a process similar to distilling liquids. The various liquids are blended in a pot and boiled to produce steam which condenses after rising to produce a purer substance, which falls back down to be boiled again and further refined before being consumed, stored, or used immediately as fuel.

As an analogy to your personal practice, try to feel the circulation from the tan-tien through the arms and in and out of the fingers or palms while doing this qigong. I agree with those who say that what we have done in our modern life is forgot how to listen to our bodies, the processes which should be natural. This is not the same as being obsessed with our inner workings as is common in Western society, where self-absorbtion and obsession are so commonplace as to be seen as the norm, e.g., the Me generation.

Practising *Standing While Holding the Eight Mother Palms* can, in the long run, make you a better person and/or a better martial artist. To see long-term benefits, you need to practise daily from 15–30 minutes at a time for at least one year before moving on to one of the moving methods of qigong. The methods that Erle Montaigue recommends are safe,

simple, and effective—and magical in the best sense of that word—if you work at them with any regularity and diligence.

Details of Practice

- Stepping into a shoulder-width Horse Stance with the left foot, assume a double-weighted stance, with your feet parallel to one another;
- the legs should be bent with the knees aligned over the toes, which are lightly contracted, as if you were starting to pick a pencil off the floor with them;
- the fingers are stretched apart with a slight tension, so that the palms are concave and the finger tips are slightly clawed;
- the wrists, with the exception of two postures, are normally held straight in relation to the fingertips and forearms;
- the tongue is pressed lightly onto the upper palate, with the chin pulled slightly in to help lift the top of the back of the head;
- the shoulders are rounded and the elbows hang;
- the spine, from crown to coccyx, has an elongated feel and a slight "C" shape.

Hold each palm for one to five minutes. (You can rest for up to a minute between palms by keeping the hands in the lower position before moving onto the next when doing longer amounts of each consecutively.) Inhale and imagine the *Qi* coming in through the fingertips and descending to the lower tan-tien. Exhale and imagine it being expelled from the abdominal area up and out the fingertips while doing so. With time you will find that your breathing slows somewhat and eventually each breath will take about ten seconds each. However, never try to force your breathing to be slower than normal; just relax and be patient.

Symbolism of Each Palm: While holding each shape, it is wise to have a mental image to correspond with each posture. It is often said in the traditional arts that the intention leads the *Qi*, and the *Qi* leads the physical effort. At least for the first few months that you practise, I would recommend repeating the following description in quotations to yourself as you begin holding each of the eight palms.

Heaven Palm	"This heals the head," including the mind and spirit, as well as the physical structure.
Earth Palm	"This heals the left side of the torso," including the organs on that side of the body, the skin, bones, and muscles tissues.
Fire Palm	"This heals the eyes," (considered the windows of the Soul in both Western and Eastern spirituality).
Thunder Palm	"This heals the middle of the torso," (particularly, but not exclusively, the digestive system).
Wind Palm	"This heals the lower spine and *ming-men.*"

Water Palm	"This heals the kidneys." It is important to remember that in Traditional Chinese Medicine, the kidneys are thought to regulate and be linked to sexual functioning as well as the strength of the legs.
Mountain Palm	"This heals the neck and upper part of the spine."
Cloud Palm	"This heals the right side of the torso," including the organs on that side of the body, the skin, bones, and muscle tissues.

Advanced Standing Still Qigong: Push the Palms

Starting from the Wuji Posture, shift the weight of the body onto the right leg, so that you can extend your left hand and left foot forward while the right hand covers the centreline and faces into the upper forearm of the left arm. All the weight of the body has dropped into and remains on the right leg. The right Dragon Palm is facing the inside of the left elbow and forearm area. Inhale and push with the centre of both palms while straightening the fingers. Exhale, while retracting the palms, and let the fingers return to the Dragon Palm shape. Do 8 or 16 of these breaths. There should be minimal movement of the body and the arms.

Use a Changing Step to retract the left side and extend the right side so that you can do an equal number of breaths on that side. Do not move the weight from the rear leg and don't use your arms to push—use your palms! It is important to not overdo this exercise as you can strain the muscles and ligaments in the palm and, in energy terms, you can raise up too much *Yang* energy!

I am not quite sure if this is what Erle calls this qigong method, and it can be found on his video produced in the mid-1990s that had the fighting methods, as well as the eight wrist releases, the eight kicking methods and a variety of training methods.

Basic Moving Qigong: Walking the Circle

I have often read or been told that walking while holding the Eight Mother Palms is actually the foundation of bagua both as a healing and martial system and, like most beginners, assumed that this was just a way to get us to put up with the tedium of basic training so that we could get on with the really important stuff—the various forms. Well, wrong again!

The essence of the art does lie in walking in circles; but not quite in the way or for the reasons the average beginner would assume. In fact, walking the circle does what it is supposed to: strengthens the body in a variety of ways, providing a mild or moderate cardiovascular workout in a small amount of space (like a hamster turning endlessly in its wheel but without the smell of cedar chips!) while calming the mind and spirit. In the long run, nothing else matters as much.

Many who practise in Europe or North America are obliged, due to inclement weather, to do too much of their training indoors, and it can be tough for a beginner to walk a circle without having a pattern to follow. But painting a circle in red paint on your wife's shag rug isn't always a solution, as has been playfully suggested on a couple of Erle's bagua videos.

If you are obliged to practise indoors, one way to achieve a circular path is to walk around a torchiere-style floor lamp. These are normally tall enough so that you can walk freely around its base while keeping one palm aligned with its shaft. Similarly, you can use the circles painted onto the floors of gymnasiums used for basketball or floor hockey, although it is not often easy to get the use of such facilities for something like bagua practice.

In parks frequented by Chinese practitioners, it is common to find trees that have circular trails worn around their trunks in the grass or soil. Using a tree as the focus of your circle is a venerable and legitimate aspect of many different qigong practices, inside bagua and in other internal systems. I must admit that I was reluctant to try it years ago when first told about it. However, it can certainly feel great to do your standing qigong with your arms embracing a tree, or your palms held very close to the surface of the bark. Of course, pine sap is awfully sticky in the Springtime…, and ants can become a problem in the Summer…, and the leaves dropping on your head can be distracting in the Fall…, and it can be bloody cold in the Winter…, and bystanders tend to think you are crazy if you are practising anywhere except in a park full of elderly Chinese.

However, in all seriousness, there is a lot to be said for practising with trees in this way. Traditionally, the most beneficial time of the year to do this kind of qigong training was the Spring, particularly when the trees were flowering. But Fall and Winter practice could also be very beneficial, especially when done with and/or surrounded by evergreen trees. Pines, by virtue of their longevity and vigour, being particularly favoured for such qigong.

But, you don't have to be Chinese…. In fact, any of us with Scandinavian, Germanic or Anglo-Saxon blood had ancestors who were worshipping the oak trees in Europe as recently as the Dark Ages, which is a blink in the eye for Father Time. So, hug a tree today for a variety of reasons. It is better than chopping them down or beating on each other with the exuberance of macho youth!

Details of Practice: The Tiger Step footwork, which is normally used for walking the circle, resembles ordinary walking in that the heel touches down, followed by the outside of the foot, and then the toes. This method is more practical for walking on irregular terrain than the other major stepping method, the Slip Step. It is usually used in walking the circle, both solo and with a partner, and in the Linear and weapons forms. Also called, in some bagua styles, the Natural Step, this footwork requires that your body weight stays on the rear leg as much as possible, and you always move the front foot first when initiating a step after having stopped.

The correct mechanics of the Tiger/Natural Step require that you land on the new foot with the toes up and the knee almost straight. There should be little or no weight on that heel as it touches the floor. Once the heel lands, shift your weight to bend your knee and gradually let the sole of the foot touch the floor. As soon as the foot is flat, all the weight should be on that leg, and the other foot steps through to land relatively empty of weight on the heel so that the stepping process is ready to continue.

While you shouldn't actually stop moving each time you finish shifting your weight and dropping the foot—*you should be able to do so.* Unfortunately, many settle for getting the body mechanics, sort of, and end up walking in a "floating" or "double-weighted" manner. Stepping properly at a slow or medium pace is essential for learning how to move by

repositioning a foot and only then smoothly transferring all of the body weight to that leg. Learning to do this ensures that you can suddenly change direction if such is necessary.

I suggest getting used to walking the circle while using only one palm posture until you can fairly easily do an inside and outside change, which are the only ways that you will change direction while using the Eight Mother Palms. The inside turn is the most commonly used, and the easiest, method of changing direction. For example, you are facing into the circle with your weight on your left leg, and your left hand leading into the circle as you walk counterclockwise. To change direction, you swivel on your heels as a result of having shifted your weight and pumped your right palm towards the centre of the circle while retracting the left hand to its guard position near the right elbow. Now you can walk clockwise. The outside turn occurs when you are in a Scissors Stance, and you must turn on your heels with both toes spinning around to the rear in an outside arc out of the circle. As you do this, lead the turning action with the hand which will be in the centre of the circle so that once you complete the spinning on the heels you have reversed directions on the circle. Great power is generated using this method, but if you don't have good balance, don't lead with the correct hand and head/eyes, and don't have your feet in the proper relation to the circle and to each other, it is easy to lose your balance while executing.

Once you have become accustomed to holding your arms in the proper positions, keeping the palms stretched and the fingers separated, as well as being able to do inside and outside turns as required, you should hold the eight palms, one after the other, while walking the circle.

Counting the number of circles each way can help you keep track of time. If you are using a circle proportional to your height, count eight of your natural paces in a circular pattern to figure out what the proper size is for you. It should take 15–30 minutes to walk the eight palms while holding eight repetitions each way. Remember, you should hold each palm while walking first counterclockwise and then clockwise, before switching to the next. Erle recommends another way of training which can be very helpful to the beginner. Record on audio tape random numbers from one to eight for a 15–30 minute time-span. Play the tape while walking and try to change very quickly to the number of that particular palm as you hear it said. Change direction using an inside or outside turn as appropriate. At a more advanced level, record two numbers on the tape recorder. As the two numbers are heard, change so that the left palm assumes the first number heard while the other—the second number.

Training Tips:

- As soon as possible try not to look at your feet when walking the circle by yourself. This is essential, as most beginners will drop their heads to look down, which breaks the key alignment of the spine. Keep your eyes directly on your lead hand as much as possible while walking. This will prevent most people from feeling dizzy or nauseous, which are common symptoms of walking for most beginners.
- It is counterproductive to go too fast, as you are likely to blur the technical performance of each posture, get winded, or lose your balance if your body stiffens as you turn.

- However, if you go too slowly, you are more likely to injure your knees or ankles through poor alignment, and it is harder to use the waist and the change of weight from one leg to the other to properly generate the turns and arm movements.
- Be aware of the common tendency to drop the lead hand too much while walking, in an effort to keep the shoulders from stiffening and rising up. In general, the tip of the longest finger on the lead hand should be aligned with the tip of your nose—assuming that your head is held properly suspended to begin with.
- Change to the new palm as you change direction using either the inside or outside change. While it doesn't matter ultimately which hand goes under and which goes over while switching, it is a good idea for beginners to be consistent. For example, always move the advancing arm over the retreating arm while doing an inside change; and always move the advancing arm under the retreating arm while doing an outside change. As you perform a turn, brush the forearms lightly together while switching, and remember to lead that action with the new palm, not the old one.
- Using a timer that beeps at preset intervals can be a good way of training for a predetermined amount of time. Try to change spontaneously as soon as you hear the alarm. You will need a model that resets itself automatically after it beeps.
- Remember, no matter how quickly you walk the circle—whether on your own or with a partner—you should not develop any momentum from falling into position.

Advanced Moving Qigong: Holding the Eight Energies

Using the following eight additional palms while walking the circle is designed to help the intermediate level student to develop the movement of internal energy: beginning with bringing the energy to the lower tan-tien and legs, then to the middle tan-tien and arms, then to the upper tan-tien and crown of the head, then opening the back while hollowing the chest, then the chest is rounded and the sternum closed, then splitting between backward and forward, then splitting between high and low, then, finally, tying them all together in the eighth posture.

Some systems identify the eight energies with corresponding animals, real and mythic. As with most aspects of this internal discipline, there is very little consistency between the various styles. Walking the circle and changing smoothly from one to the other at equal intervals are an excellent supplements to form practice or holding the Eight Mother Palms while circling.

As with other forms of martial qigong, these walking methods teach subtle martial skills, and I will add that the changes done when changing direction and/or method contain the essence of these martial energies and directions. However, they are equally designed to strengthen and heal the practitioner. (N.B. Erle does not teach this particular set; I learned it elsewhere in recent years.)

Downward Sinking Palms/Tiger: Both hands push downwards, just below the navel, with the mental image of holding the *Qi* in the lower tan-tien. The basic martial skill is deflecting a straight kick downwards.

Double Lifting Palms/Crane: The arms are extended to the sides, palms up, at about shoulder heigh. This posture helps to connect the the lower tan-tien to the middle tan-tien in the solar plexus and to spread the energy out to both palms in a balanced manner. The wrists are slightly *Yang.* Focus on the palms as if you were holding something small and round in the hollow of each palm. The basic martial skill is cutting with the edge of the hand to deflect, and thrusting forward to counter-attack with the same hand.

Heaven and Earth Palms/Lion: One hand is extended into the circle, palm up; the other arcs above the head, palm up. This posture takes the energy that has been brought to the middle tan-tien and allows it to flow up to the upper tan-tien located behind the Third Eye Point *(Yintang)*. The practitioner imagines that the *Qi* is flowing through the arms in a circular loop, as well as rising through the ground, and descending from the Heavens through the spine. The basic martial skill is deflecting with the back hand and breaking an arm at the elbow with a striking lock.

Embracing Palm/Ape: The forearms are held together with both palms upwards; the hands are being held as if they are cradling a bowling ball. This posture opens up the energy in the back, closes the front of the chest, and allows the *Qi* to flow into the hands. The basic martial action is deflecting downwards to strike forward and slightly upwards into the throat or jawline with both hands.

Double Crushing Palms/Bear: This posture expands the energy in the chest by pushing the palms outwards, makes the shoulders very rounded. The image is of pushing the arms out, down, and away from the body, as if crashing/crushing through any obstacles. The basic martial action deflects downwards and crushes both palms forward and downwards through the attacker's chest.

Turning Palms/Hawk: One hand spirals diagonally forward and up, while the other spirals diagonally downwards and back. This posture will help you to understand splitting/folding energy. The basic martial action is to strike down while striking upwards.

Upper & Lower Standing Palms/Snake: One hand is held high and the other low. In holding this posture, you learn to separate the energy between high and low, front and back, while still remaining full and complete. The basic martial action teaches the cutting aspect of the edge of the hands for both offensive and defensive purposes.

Twisting-Turning Palm/Dragon: One hand is held over the centre of the circle while the other is open near the elbow. This on guard position is the "signature palm" of our style and combines all the other energies and lines of attack and defence.

General Guidelines for Qigong Practice

Practise the most active qigongs in the early morning and the less active and quiet ones in the evening. If doing several qigongs during the same practice session, do the less active first and progress through the more complex in the AM and reverse that sequence in the PM. The idea is to be in accordance with the natural rhythm of the day.

Practise outside whenever possible, particularly in the Springtime, and try to do the quieter methods barefeet, if possible. If you must practise indoors, try to do it on a balcony or at least facing a large window, especially if you have a view of nature.

Don't try to adhere to a rigid schedule of progress—such concepts are ridiculous in terms of becoming healthier physically and emotionally. If you force the intensity of your training, progress will not happen naturally, and being natural is one of the cornerstones of internal training. Conversely, if you only practise when you feel like it, you are even less likely to get enough practice to see any real benefit. I have found that forcing myself to train when I least feel like it has been beneficial in fighting whatever stress was causing the reluctance to train in the first place (i.e., when in mourning for a loved one, when tired from the stress of daily life).

Don't confuse the forest with the trees—symptoms of *Qi* movement are transitory and should not be the object of obsessive fascination (e.g., "Yesterday I was 'one with the universe,' and it was marvellous. I want it to happen again today."). Many people practise for years without dramatic experiences or revelations, but that doesn't mean that they are not benefiting from their training.

Don't force the breathing in any way. That includes trying too hard to use abdominal or natural breathing patterns. The breathing should be encouraged to deepen and slow down, but don't try to force yourself to breathe correctly, as causing extra tension trying to force your breathing is hardly a worthwhile path.

Don't eat a big meal, drink alcohol, or engage in sexual activity for at least one hour before and after practising qigong. In regards to the latter, there tends to be a wide variety of opinions. For example, Dr. Yang Jwing Ming in one of his excellent texts on qigong recommends at least 24 hours of abstinence from sexual activity before and after qigong.

With particular regard to food, when your stomach is full, abdominal breathing and certain moving methods will affect your digestion, and you can experience cramps or bloating. Similarly, don't practise with a full bowel or bladder. "Holding it in" will impede your concentration on stance, breathing, and visualisation, and can result in a famous qigong condition called Wet Rug. Conversely, don't train if you haven't eaten in some time. It is hard to concentrate if your stomach growls constantly. Have a light nutritious meal before training.

If you think of your training as being partly to refine and produce a better quality of *Qi*, it is important to have a healthy diet that contains sufficient and balanced foods while avoiding greasy or sweet things. Nor is it necessary to abstain from meat or dairy products unless you do so on ethical grounds or have an allergy to the latter. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that no food or a severely restrictive diet will somehow purify you or make you a better practitioner.

Don't train in either an excessively cold or hot environment. In particular, avoid standing in the draft of an air conditioning unit when inside or facing the wind if practising outside. When doing qigong your pores will be open, and you will be more likely to catch a chill. Similarly, don't continue to train if you are wearing excessively sweaty clothing, as you want to avoid getting chilled from both a traditional Chinese and Western medical perspectives.

Some authorities emphasise the importance of wearing long-sleeved clothing made from natural materials, i.e., silk, cotton, linen, because synthetics can impede *Qi* flow. I have always preferred the feel of natural materials in my own training, but it is also interesting to note that many of those who advocate the importance of wearing silk or cotton nowadays are also selling qigong outfits made of these same materials! It is also important to acknowledge that some modern synthetics are excellent for resisting wind chill and wicking sweat away from the skin, which minimises chilling when training outside.

Traditional experts also feel that long sleeves and long pants help to keep the *Weiqi* (our innate protective energy) where it belongs, evenly distributed on the surface of the skin, instead of leaking away from the arms and legs when the limbs are uncovered. It is easy to get carried away with rules like this, though, and I think common sense and the weather should dictate your clothing when you train.

Don't wear tight clothing, belts, or brassiere, as they may restrict the easy expansion of the lower tan-tien or natural chest expansion. Traditionally, the lower and middle tan-tien areas are considered physical pumps for energy, this is why it is very important not to restrict the in-and-out expansion of these areas.

Don't practise standing qigong if you have a fever, or are in the acute phase of an illness, or are very angry. Moving qigong at a moderate pace is better for practising when angry or very depressed, which psychologically is often interpreted as repressed anger. Normally, you will feel more cheerful after having a more vigorous workout—thanks partly to the production of endorphins from the physical demands of the moving qigong.

Women should stop or moderate their training during menses and focus on the middle tan-tien while doing *zhanzhong*. This is a difficult subject to hand out advice on—partly because I am a man, partly because female students each tend to experience different effects of their training. Certainly, for those women who practise standing and moving qigong regularly, there can be an effect on the severity and duration of periods. This is beneficial for some, not others, e.g.,"My periods seem shorter and less painful, and I experience less PMS than I used to." but "If I stand while menstruating I become very uncomfortable." or "My periods are longer and heavier than they used to be."

Make sure that you don't close your eyes completely when training, but don't get mesmerised by one point of reference in the scenery or your environment (i.e., fixating on a speck of dirt on the window or a particular branch on a tree) as this can also disturb proper attentiveness and make you feel dizzy.

Don't practise when there is a dramatic change in the weather. Your training can interfere with your body's natural readjustment to the new weather patterns. This doesn't apply if you happen to be doing one of the qigongs designed to aid in adapting to the changes of the five traditional Chinese seasons (Spring, Summer, Late Summer, Fall, and Winter).

Don't move your arms from the required position to scratch a sudden itch. Such sensations are a stage many practitioners go through. Doing so interrupts the postures you should be holding or doing at the time and means that the natural rebalancing of your body is impeded when your hands wander about consciously in this way.

Don't practise when angry. If you are interrupted by family, or friends, or the telephone, avoid losing your temper. This is particularly bad for the *Qi* and the liver. Don't resume practising immediately unless you have been able to restore your sense of calm.

Finally, if you are shopping around and learning methods elsewhere, don't do qigong exercises that you are not physically or emotionally prepared for. When in doubt, consult a recognised qigong doctor. It is human nature to feel that you don't have to do basic qigong exercises, as you have experience in other meditation methods. For most of us "pride goes before the fall," and it is easy to overestimate the value of your previous experiences.

> DON'T TRY TO SELF-DIAGNOSE AND HEAL SERIOUS AND/OR ACUTE MEDICAL CONDITIONS EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH METHODS THAT YOU HAVE LEARNED FROM ME OR ANOTHER BAGUA TEACHER—CONSULT A REPUTABLE QIGONG OR TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE DOCTOR.

COMMON SYMPTOMS EXPERIENCED DURING OR AFTER TRAINING

You feel dull and scattered: On days when you are exceptionally tired, or mentally fatigued, or just can't seem to focus on anything, or obsessed over the details of your training—stop and go for a long walk, ride your bike, do something physical that interests and stimulates you in a pleasant and moderate way.

You feel cold all over or in specific parts of the body: In the first few months of regular training it is common to have sensations of excessive cold in the extremities, especially if you are a smoker or female, or to feel cold when practising standing quietly, as opposed to moving qigong. If the feeling of cold is accompanied by pain, stop training that method and consult a qigong doctor or acupuncturist. This may be the symptom of a deficiency of *Yang* energy.

You feel numbness or tingling in the limbs or hands: Some experts, Erle Montaigue included, have told me this is a frequent by-product of practising qigong and is a good sign. It means the *Qi* is trying to get through properly in areas where it has been blocked. However, if the numbness or tingling continues after you stop doing qigong, it might also be the symptoms of nerve damage in the affected limb or of something like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. This tingling can feel like a mild case of when your foot goes to sleep, or it can feel like the vibrating/buzzing sensation that you get when you place your hand on a small motor housing.

You feel sore or in pain: I am afraid that some pain and discomfort is normally present in the first few months of training, whether you are doing everything correctly or not. Your body/mind, probably, doesn't like standing still, and it sends you signals designed to make you stop. Within reason, you should persist. Try tensing and releasing your toes if the pain is in your feet. If the pain is in your shoulders or arms, try holding the palm shapes closer to the body. If the pain is in the legs or lower back, try rocking the body forward and back or side to side.

Of course, you can also be standing with your butt stuck out and your spine arched, which means that you will experience pain for that reason. It is important to make sure that your posture is sound when doing any form of qigong, you don't go too fast or try too many repetitions of the moving methods. *Don't ignore pain that is agonising, or sharp, or that persists after your training session.*

You get a Headache or Aching Eyes: Headaches are often a sign of *Qi* congestion in the head and can be relieved by doing "grounding" methods or by massaging the appropriate acupuncture points on the body. You may experience aching eyes if you are staring too much in general, or when you are doing methods that affect the liver or strengthen the eyes.

Trembling: You could write a book on this subject alone. Many experts say that you must experience a probationary period of time in which you tremble, sometimes violently, for all or part of your qigong. Others say that you should never consciously induce trembling or shaking as a means of inducing physical relaxation or of encouraging the *Qi* to flow freely through minor blockages. You must also discriminate between the shaking that happens when you are doing standing still exercises as opposed to moving methods, where the shaking is more likely to be localised in the arms and shoulders and caused by excess muscle use or tension. If you are used to doing meditation or are strong but relaxed to begin with, you may never experience any significant shaking. Speaking from my own experience, I find that I tremble and shake much less than a few years ago when I do my standing. And when it still happens, it is usually on days when I was feeling tenser or more tired than usual. An episode of shaking should subside fairly quickly, although you may experience aftershocks a few moments later.

You experience excessive sweating even though you are standing still: There are several streams of thought on sweating in qigong. If you sweat while doing self-healing methods, you are too tense or using too much muscle, i.e., you are doing it wrong! However, many experts interpret sweating as a sign that you are doing the methods properly, and you are releasing stagnant *Qi* and toxins through the pores. The truth, probably, lies somewhere in between. I was sweating like a pig when doing certain methods for the first few months. Nowadays, I rarely sweat when doing the methods I practise regularly. And of course, if you are training outside on a very hot day—guess what? You should sweat!!!

You become Frightened or Startled: Many experts advocate training alone in a quiet and private environment. You can become very sensitive to outside stimuli—a sudden noise or a touch. Perhaps, it is like the phenomena you can experience when wakened during a dream, when you feel disoriented and are not quite awake. I have experienced this and seen it happen to others in my classes. It can "disturb and scatter the *Qi*"—as the traditionalists would say—so that you feel agitated and upset for quite sometime afterwards. N.B. Some experts maintain that your training should eventually reach the point when you can continue in a state of sung even though "Mount Tai should collapse at your feet."

You have difficulty sleeping: In general, the practice of standing and moving qigong will be very beneficial to your sleep patterns, as you become more relaxed and stronger internally. However, it is important not to do methods that are too stimulating before bedtime. Although, depending on the season, your health, and the time of month, you may find that

any method will energise you too much if done too close to bedtime. A rule of thumb is to practise the most active methods in the morning and the quieter methods in the evening.

You start coughing for no reason: Assuming that you don't have a cold or flu, the most common cause of coughing is using too much muscle while doing methods that affect the lungs. Smokers may also find that they have coughing fits when doing even gentle methods. Another good reason to quit!

You get aroused while training: This is a very common side effect to qigong training and can be very disturbing to some people. It is important to remember that the Taoists often had a very healthy attitude to sexuality and realised that sexual energy is an important aspect of a healthy life. Some of the traditional methods are designed to restore normal functioning to the sexual organs, and becoming healthier in general can restore interest in such matters. Don't worry about transitory feelings of arousal while you train, and don't be surprised if you don't start being interested in such activity again if your interest had waned because of poor health or being stressed out.

You are hungry all the time or have lost interest in eating: Qigong can have a profound effect on your metabolism. Quite often it will make a skinny person regain an interest in food and gain weight, and a fat person lose weight even though they are not trying to do so! Some methods are more effective than others in this realm, and the adjustment is partly due to abdominal breathing massaging the digestive system, and partly due to a gradual change in how you approach eating on an emotional level, i.e., if you eat to compensate for depression or being overstressed, such cravings may cease as you become healthier through your training.

Conclusion

Standing qigong is a marvellous exercise for beginners, although they rarely agree. It is designed to teach fundamentals of posture and body mechanics, slowing the breathing, and learning how to relax as much as possible while still doing work, and how to stretch the fingers and the palms.

The intermediate level of bagua student should concentrate on walking the circle as the primary qigong method. The one-legged standing Breathing Palms Method is also time-effecient method of martial qigong.

However, too much standing is not good for an individual. It can be addictive. I would be remiss if I didn't point out that obsessively standing still in weird positions is a symptom of certain neurological and psychological disorders. On a purely physical level it can needlessly stress the body. For example, circulatory problems (e.g., haemorrhoids) are common results for those who stand excessive periods of time, especially when they don't get a sufficient amount of movement exercise.

One of my taiji students was apparently recently telling her Chinese acupuncturist about the hip troubles that I have suffered in recent years. He was apparently surprised until told that I did standing qigong and other internal martial arts. "Oh, sometimes, people who do a lot of standing qigong get hip troubles," was his comment. So, there you go—perhaps I overdid it and should have listened to my own good advice!

One last word of advice—time is inelastic, and it is better to know a few training methods well and practise them regularly than to be a dabbler. Erle taught me other qigongs as well that I no longer practise or teach. There are a host of others that I never practised regularly available on his videos. Feel free to experiment with those or with any competent methods you can learn elsewhere, but remember to focus in your daily training on those methods that are most beneficial to your individual needs.

Chapter Three

Fundamentals: The Empty-Hand Solo Forms

As I said in the previous chapter, there is a tendency among modern martial artists to assume that the forms, due to their difficulty and complexity, are the more advanced ways of training. In many schools, basic training tends to be glossed over in favour of focusing on learning and practising a variety of forms. It is worth repeating that the essence of bagua lies as much in regular and attentive practice of walking the circle by yourself as in the various forms and training methods. The latter are recipes for nourishing food; the former is the garden where you grow all the ingredients for those recipes.

As to forms practice for the sake of knowing another form, I remember seeing a television documentary on the martial arts a few years ago. They were interviewing one well-respected long-term karate expert, Shihan John Bluming. He was asked why so many modern martial arts schools seemed to focus on forms. His answer was short and profound (you will have to imagine the heavy Dutch accent), "Instructors love teaching forms; the hours go by, and the money rolls in…."

Cynical, perhaps, but there is an unfortunate tendency in modern commercial schools to focus on teaching those things that require less one-on-one supervision, rather than repeating the basics of solo and fighting practice. Plus, modern students quickly get bored if told to "hold that stance" or "walk the circle" class after class—and they might take their fees to another school!

Details Of Posture

The Head

The practitioner's head must be held as if gently suspended and with the neck feeling long. Unfortunately, students often tighten the neck muscles in order to keep the head upright and the chin pulled in. It is better to imagine that a small object is resting on top of the back of the head and must be supported there through proper posture alone. The other way to approach this is to feel as if your head is being pulled upwards gently, as if suspended, like the strings of a marionette support its head.

As to the mind inside the head, the ultimate goal is to bring a mindless attentiveness to your solo practice. This is, of course, easier said than done, and I certainly don't experience it with any consistency during my training. It is also hard to put into words and tends to vary with the form being done. One day, the Circular Form may have a smooth and wave-like feeling—like being in a river and floating along in a mild current on a warm summer day. On another day, the Linear Form can feel quite imperative—like you are a barbarian charging and shrieking to throw yourself on the unsuspecting Roman legions marching past in the Teutoburg Forest. (Yes, I have watched too many historical movies over the years!)

Even though the gaze of the eyes should be unfocused when doing the Wuji Posture. If you change direction suddenly while moving from one posture to another, they must express attitude in the sense of looking forward through the lead hand or in the new direction once you start to move. The gaze should not be lowered even when the practitioner focuses inwardly. The mind, as much as the eyes, is responsible for maintaining a sense of where you are and where you are going while training.

The eyes are also responsible for leading the body in a new direction when a change of direction is necessary. This is a difficult concept to get, as the natural tendency is to turn the head instead of the eyes when changing direction. It take time to learn how to lead with the eyes and turn the head properly at the right moment.

One of the reasons for not turning the head just any old way is it encourages the skull to be centred and gently raised, as it should always be. If you were struck in the head (remember the martial roots of bagua) or pulled suddenly by the arm, with your head loose and unaligned, you are more likely to be injured or knocked out.

Conversely, using your eyes properly but not allowing the head to turn, means that it can become difficult to do some of the directional changes without losing your balance. In addition, if you don't exercise them, the muscles of the upper shoulders and neck tend to stiffen or atrophy to some extent. This is why you should supplement your form training with other exercises or qigongs that safely train a full range of motion in the neck and, for that matter, in all of the joints.

The lips should stay gently closed, and the teeth should remain in light contact. The tongue stays raised on the upper palate. While there are different opinions on what type of facial expression (if any) is appropriate, my own feeling is that a gentle smile is most appropriate for setting the mood for solo training and relaxing the many small muscles of the face and jaw. You may find that the type of expression can vary spontaneously depending on the type of form being done as well as your mood on a particular day.

Learning to keep the tip of the tongue gently pressed up against the roof of the mouth and held behind the two front teeth is an integral part of the internal martial arts and qigong. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. For example, when using a cleansing breath by exhaling through the mouth, the tongue will drop temporarily away from the upper palate. Similarly, issuing power by striking while using a HA sound will also mean that the tongue drops temporarily away from the upper palate. In general though, the tongue stays up and behind the teeth. Instructors who have been trained in a traditional manner may talk about the importance of doing this in conjunction with lifting the *Huiyin* point between the legs when inhaling or exhaling, depending on their preferences and to the type of breath being

done, to maintain a more efficient flow of *Qi* through the Governing and Conceptor Vessels along the midline of the back and front of the torso and head respectively.

However, there are two other very pragmatic reasons to keep the tongue against the roof of the mouth. Deep breathing can dry the mouth out surprisingly quickly, leaving that orifice more prone to infection by viruses and bacteria that more easily cross the membranes of the mouth and throat under such conditions—particularly, if you don't make a conscious effort to only inhale through the nose. However, keeping the tongue lifted stimulates the production of saliva which moistens the membranes and also has antibiotic properties to defend against such infection.

This flow also stimulates the digestive system, which may also help explain why a very common by-product of doing qigong is feeling hungry after you train. Similarly, saliva is full of hormones, and swallowing this fluid during practice, as is often recommended, ensures that these hormones are not wasted by being expelled. As Erle Montaigue has often said, only partly in jest, "the internal arts are very green" (i.e., in favour of recycling).

Bad martial habits are easier to create than to correct, and one such habit is failing to keep your mouth shut and your tongue in place *behind the teeth and not between them* while practising combat skills with a partner, or while fighting. Over the years, I have noticed that a number of otherwise talented practitioners have had difficulty breaking the habit of letting the tip of the tongue protrude or keeping the mouth slack while training. Such habits are more likely to develop when there is little or no contact to the head as in most modern martial arts.

It is one thing to constantly verbally remind someone that they should pull their tongue in and close their mouth, but some have to be tapped in the jaw once or twice before they realise how painful it can be to ignore the teacher about what seems like a meaningless detail. Small details, like this one, are what make up the bulk of one's training once you are no longer a beginner. From all this the seeds of true skill are sown.

Oh, and by the way, there is the issue of learning to avoid getting into a scrap that would otherwise never had happened if you had remembered your teacher's good advice "to hold your tongue." (I say this only partly tongue-in-cheek, which in itself is also a very bad pun!)

The Torso

The entire spine to the top of the neck must be held straight but not stiff. However, a common internal arts misconception is to stiffly extend the spine in order to eliminate the curves that nature intended your spine to have. While the area of the *ming-men* must be relaxed, the admonition to straighten the spine does not mean to "iron it out." The S-shaped curves are meant to provide suspension so that your structure is flexible and does not jar the brain and the internal organs with every step.

One of the most important rules of practice is *han-shou*, where *han* means containing something fragile or "holding it carefully," and *shou* means chest. As *han* can also means "swallow" or "inward" in Chinese, some practitioners have interpreted *han-shou* as bending or hollowing the chest inwards. However, according to some experts with real skill in

both the Chinese internal arts and the Chinese language (thanks to Tim Cartmell), a more accurate interpretation of *han-shou* is to empty the chest or to let it do its job of "being empty" in terms of heart/lung function. If those organs are tight or constricted, it is impossible for them to work efficiently.

It is a gross distortion of the intent of the early masters to tuck your butt in forcibly and round the shoulders all the time while doing qigong or the forms. When you see real masters of this art—and of any martial art that can claim sound physical body mechanics—there is always a beautiful straightness to their posture. Strong but not stiff.

The lower abdomen should be like the chest—relaxed and empty—so that movement in that part of the body can be led by the back and the waist. Traditionally, this will make it possible to lead the *Qi* down to the tan-tien. Students through different exercises, depending on the style they are learning and the strengths and weaknesses of each instructor, will gradually develop an awareness of the spine being the controlling component of vertical circling.

The waist is in charge of horizontal turning and twisting, so it must be very relaxed and flexible and must not tip to one side (i.e., one hip mustn't ever be significantly higher than the other). The waist should be thought of as the crucial link between the upper and lower halves of the body. The old masters offered a valuable piece of taiji advice that is certainly relevant in bagua as we do it: "If the movement is still not correct after the arms and legs have been corrected, then the deficiency is probably in the waist."

The Arms

Modern students, particularly those who are desk-bound in their daily work, tend to have very tense shoulder muscles and a slumped posture. It can be very difficult to get them to achieve an active relaxation of those areas. Do not try to fabricate the feeling by leaning forward, forcing the shoulders forward and down, or sticking the neck out. Raising the shoulders and pushing them forward violates the traditional stipulation *ba bei,* where *ba* means to stretch and straighten, while *bei* refers to the back.

The arms tend to be overused in many athletic endeavours and underused in the internal arts. The goal is not to move the arms as if there is no range of mobility in the elbows, but to decrease the use of the arms in favour of increasing the co-ordination of the arm expansion and contraction with the expansion and contraction of the body as a whole. It is important to remember that the early practitioners of the internal arts in China were either farmers, or professional bodyguards, or teachers of the martial arts. They were already physically strong from years of working in the fields or from years of training. They didn't need building-up the way most modern students do!

The wrists should remain relaxed throughout all the movements, and while it is desirable for a variety of reasons to understand *Yin* and *Yang* in those joints, particularly for martial purposes. It is even more important to avoid tension, particularly in the palm and fingers. The fingers should be gently curved but not stiff and separated gently from one another. The palm should be curved and "soft."

If the wrong kind of focus is obsessively directed to the palms and fingers, sensations such as trembling, heat and redness of skin, as well as feelings of fullness or tingling can follow. These sensations can be symptoms of enhanced *Qi* flow, but are nothing special in the sense that a student should not chase experiencing such phenomena while practising. They can also be symptoms that you are overdoing certain aspects of your training and that your limbs are protesting.

As to which came first: the hands or the body.… There is a strong thread in many traditional bagua styles of having the hands lead the body into position—as opposed to being pushed into position by the torso/waist and weight change, as is usually done in our bagua. However, body following the hands is not always inappropriate, depending on the martial situation. It can be fascinating to try to explore how the various styles explore and label a common set of body mechanics and posture. In Erle's forms and methods the waist will normally feel and act as if it powers and leads the action of the arms and hands. In practice, this should be almost simultaneous.

The Legs

The hips are crucial to supporting the work of the spine and waist, not to mention the weight of the body. They must be relaxed and balanced. Despite not having a very large degree of motion, they act as the leaders of the waist in many ways, and must open and close in the same way that the shoulders must open and close in a co-ordinated manner. Sometimes merely shifting the hips in a rocking manner will provide the modicum of weight movement necessary to power a posture when there is not enough room to move the feet.

A useful concept is to maintain the feeling of the torso lifting gently off the buttocks and staying centred over them. This applies even when you lean forwards and backwards, as you sometimes do in bagua, so it is a tricky concept to get. Do not let the buttocks protrude, but at the same time don't obsess about tucking them in. Doing so is liable to cause tension and tends to cause the tailbone to tip forward, off-center from the natural vertical plane of the spine. Many people are built so that it looks as if their bum is sticking out when it is not really affecting their postural integrity.

In Chinese martial arts, the term *ming-dang* means to close the inner groin and buttocks area. *Dang* refers to the entire perineal area, and lifting this area is often misconstrued as meaning that you must squeeze or forcibly lift the sphincter muscles. This is not a healthy exercise if done to excess and will only improve sexual function in certain cases that relate to weak muscles in that area. It is better not to pay any special attention to the rectum or area of the *huiyin*, and instead try to remain relaxed so that the ligaments, muscles and tendons can be fully relaxed. The eventual aim is to have a gentle lifting feeling in the area that could be compared to wearing invisible underwear that is snug, not binding.

During training, the crucial joints of the legs are worked very hard in that they are always bent more than in normal daily activities (sometimes *very* bent, depending on the style that you follow). In addition, the arms can rest at times, but your legs must always work while you are on your feet. Relaxation and sound posture (the knee and toes in vertical alignment) help the knees transmit the weight of the body from the hips to the ankles. It bears repeat-

ing that your knees are not designed to be weight-bearing, but are meant to transmit your weight efficiently to your ankles and feet.

As to "weighting," there are two major schools of thought. The more common version is that the weight is momentarily more or less completely on one leg while the other foot is repositioned, and then the weight is immediately shifted to the new leg. The other opinion suggests that eventually being "single weighted" is meaningless in that the practitioner is completely balanced, stable and mobile—whether he or she seems to be double-weighted, perched on one foot, or standing on the head!

In essence, the latter expert (and they are very rare indeed) is moving internally all the time, even though he may seem still on the outside—like a gyroscope in its ability to right itself, or the way in which a cat can adjust itself while falling to land on its feet. This kind of footwork and movement didn't make sense to me from a logical perspective until I started doing it martially.

To my mind, this implies many years of experience. What I call "small step, big step" has become so automatic and subtle that it seems almost magical to those who can not do it. I would suspect that every internal expert who deserves that label moves in that way, whether doing Chen Style, Yang Style, bagua, hsing-i, *liu he ba fa*, or whatever. Of course, I could be wrong.… Ask my wife, apparently it happens frequently.

The ankles must be straight and relaxed to properly lead the feet. Practitioners are instructed to keep the foot flat as in the Slip Step, or to arch the sole in a natural manner—not overly flexed or artificially flattened when doing the Natural/Tiger Step. When moving, as opposed to standing qigong, it is also important to not clench the toes when trying to obey the teacher's instruction to grip the floor or earth with your toes. This is as much a mental activity as a physical one.

XIAN TIAN & HOU TIAN CONCEPTS

Xian literally means "before," and *tian* means "the sky or heaven." This phrase is commonly translated into English as "pre-birth" or "pre-heaven" training and is used to denote innate abilities. For example, we now know that human newborns have the "pre-heaven" ability to automatically hold their breath and paddle if suddenly immersed in water. This is genetic, not learned, behaviour. In most bagua styles, the circlular forms and circle walking training methods are classified as pre-heaven to show that they provide the foundation for all further activities.

By contrast, *hou* means "after or behind" so that *Hou Tian* denotes skills and abilities that are learned or acquired after birth. They are built upon the pre-heaven, innate abilities, but must be learned and practised. Such forms are derived from the circular forms and are more specifically technique and fighting oriented. For example, an individual may be able to learn skating without much training, and we would say he has natural talent, a pre-heaven ability. With proper training and technique, post-heaven abilities, he can refine and improve upon his natural abilities and skate even faster, or more skilfully, or even learn to fight other hockey players.

Pre-birth Training: the Circular Form of Jiang Jung Chiao

This form is sometimes called the Dragon Form and is practised to develop the power, speed, balance, co-ordination and agility of this legendary mythical beast. In Chinese myth, the dragon is a symbol of Imperial power as well as of *Yang* or *Yin* energy, and can be portrayed as good, neutral, or bad in the many myths about it. It is not always the reptilian monster or servant of the devil, as usually portrayed through the centuries in most Western Christian thought.

There are many different versions of this Original Form, called that to differentiate it from the other forms Master Jiang created during his career as a bagua teacher. I have seen several of these demonstrated live and on video, and some are so different that you would swear they came from completely different sources. In any case, Erle Montaigue's version holds up extremely well—especially for the martial usage—when compared to most of what I have seen elsewhere.

Erle, like many good modern teachers, has evolved his own training methods over the years, but the forms that he still teaches are much as they were when I first saw them in the late 80s. One of his first books, on both taiji and bagua, was first published in 1984 and he is hardly "jumping on the bagua bandwagon," as has sometimes been unfairly said on the Internet, just because bagua is now becoming fashionable in North America.

As to the Circular Form that he teaches, each palm change is separated by walking the circle once (Change #7 is the only exception) using the slip-stepping method, then it is done in mirror image to create a totally balanced physical exercise. While it is best to learn under supervision, it is a good practice for the student to be taught the first side and then teach him or herself the reverse side, as doing so is a great mental exercise, and our brains—not just our bodies—need exercise to remain healthy as we age.

Post-heaven Training: the Linear Form

Those bagua styles that teach some version of what Erle calls the Linear Form often teach it as either two, four, or eight mini-forms, rather than one long sequence. Furthermore, a few teachers insist that the fighting methods were never meant to be practised in sequence, but should only be taught and practised as individual units.

Similarly, a couple of older Chinese books, illustrated with line drawings, I have seen translations of, call them "The 32 Fighting Methods" even though, when you count the actual methods, you get 33, 34, or 36, not 32. The original set, apparently, ended with the Snake Method. The kick method, Dragon Whips Its Tail, was a later addition. I have seen three different such kick methods used even though each has the same name. Ah, variety—the spice of life. Of course, spicy food often gives people indigestion!

As to the types of controversy that can bedevil those researching bagua, the most reliable modern martial arts historians believe that the late Master Gao created the Linear Forms, combining the bagua he had learned from Cheng Ting Hua with techniques from his former training in Xing Yi Quan and Shaolin Chuan.

I think it is best to approach the Linear Form as being a catalogue of the most useful martial techniques found in the Circular Form. I have also read that the first eight methods are the key methods in terms of martial practicality, and that there are less than 30 basic types of application. However, from those you can make up an almost unlimited number of techniques that are variations—depending on your skill and the type of attack being used against you.

Due to the length of time that it takes to have even a basic skill in its execution, the Linear Form is becoming a rarity in modern times—few schools still teach it, and many modern teachers focus their teaching efforts on the Circular Form and selected fighting methods.

General Training Tips for Empty-Hand Forms

As I said before, I will not repeat the details of the practice of these forms at a basic level here. Erle has explained these much better in his classes, books, videos and workshops. I will append what advice I feel might be helpful from my perspective of having taught this material on an ongoing basis for over a decade.

The Six Directions

The six directions are, of course, another way of talking about the three-dimensional aspect of movement, that defines any efficient use of body mass and mechanics for qigong and martial purposes.

When you sum it up on paper, these six directions are:

- Up and down: the prime motivation in physical terms for this dimensional pair is the *ming-men* (small of the back) as well as themuscles of the abdomen. While the arms will move up and down, partly because of this mechanism and partly because of the shoulders and elbows, this space between the hip bones and the ribcage plays a crucial factor in separating internal body mechanics from a more segmented and cruder approach.
- To the left and to the right: in simple terms this is related to turning the hips and shoulders, or the waist area alone, from side-to-side as necessary. Again, connecting the minimal use of the arms to this movement is what makes the internal approach different from a more segmented/cruder approach.
- Forward and back: in simple terms this relates to shifting the body weight forward and back, as well as stepping forward and back. When you add the use of the waist for side to side movement and the use of *ming-men* for up and down movement, you begin to get the kind of physical co-ordination that is the foundation of any internal art.

Of course, it is much easier to write this or to read it than to understand what is being described on an experiential level. A simple demonstration by an instructor who can actually do the above is worth 10,000 words that the reader will only understand in his head.

Footwork

Erle recommends that the Circular Form be practised with the Slip Step, also known as the Snake or Mud Step, which requires that your weight stays on the rear leg to facilitate speedy footwork and to allow for sudden kicks. The feet are kept flat on the ground. The front foot slides, and the rear leg kicks forward and pauses before the entire process is repeated so that the feet are pushed forward by the turning of the hips. It is essential to lift and place the entire foot as a unit, moving heel and toe together.

While some styles allow you to lift the heel a little higher than the toe. This is physically easier. No good style that I am aware of allows you to lift the toes first or higher than the heel while moving that foot. It is possible to develop great speed with this method, and it is ideal on smooth surfaces. This is the hardest of the footwork methods to get right on a consistent basis, so it is worth focusing a lot of effort to get. Most people in my experience will be able to do it reasonably well and consistently walking in one direction, but not the other.

This footwork is normally used to develop the ability to do low kicks, targeted at lower shin and ankle height. Some bagua teachers state that this stepping method is really only suited to beginners, as the Tiger/Natural Step is more useful in terms of adapting to a variety of terrains.

The Linear Form, being concerned with practical martial usage, is done in a linear manner. Various methods are strung together in straight lines and turn periodically after having gone to one or more corners. The footwork is easier and more practical in martial terms. You don't have to worry about Slip Steps, narrow Bow Stances and follow-stepping are more commonly used.

Changing Directions

You will normally use the inside and outside changes the most in your forms, as well as in partner training that involves walking the circle. However, other methods are occasionally found in the forms and should become relatively easy with time and effort.

What I call the "Screwing Step" is used in the Circular Form, and occasionally in the Linear Form, as a way of twisting out of an attempted arm lock to set up a shoulder strike or throw (White Ape Builds a Nest), or as a sudden turn to block and strike, as in certain postures of the Circular Form. This is always used after having "wrapped" the arms, and it is very important to feel as if the hands lead in attempting this kind of directional change.

What I call the "Swing Step" is occasionally used in the Circular and Linear Forms, and it can be very useful for changing direction. It can add a great deal of torque to your pulling action if you have grabbed the opponent's wrist, or it can be used to suddenly lift an attacker's foot with your swinging foot to imbalance him, or to drive your moving foot downwards into your attacker's knee, shin, or foot. This movement is epitomised in the Sixth Change of the Circular Form by the footwork executed in "Sweep Ten Thousand Enemies" and in the Linear Form by the posture Checking Palm to Abdomen.

Visualisations/Attentiveness

One of the many inherent contradictions in an art like bagua is that you should not routinely practise the forms as if imaginary enemies are coming at you from every direction. Focusing too much on such martial intention can lead to a rather mechanical approach to the form, as well as cause mental tension. Conversely, you cannot really learn the right timing for each posture without at least having a rough idea of what you are doing martially in each case. In the absence of qualified instruction you can sometimes discover the spirit of the movements by taking your cue from the names of the postures. For example, Pheasant Throws Its Wings denotes a proud bird whose head is turned over its shoulder, wings outstretched as if sunbathing or displaying for a mate. But such interpretations are easy to get wrong if you don't already have a strong background in the Chinese martial arts, language, and culture.

Some of the movements are designed to be done in a *fa-jing* manner, but it is also a good practice for beginners to avoid using power and vigour in an attempt to make the movements of the form look and feel more martial and enjoy instead the movements for their own sakes. Martial function comes from understanding principles, relearning how to stand and move, and practising endlessly with a variety of partners rather than from a mere technical level of solo competency.

Particularly, if you are learning from Erle's videos almost exclusively, I would recommend practising each method or change for several weeks—if not months—before moving onto the next posture or change. It also helps to train with a partner who is watching the videos as well. Two sets of eyes and two brains are usually better at sorting out what is happening on the screen and in your practice sessions. Oh, and you will need someone to practise the applications with.…

Expressing Power in the Solo forms

Except for the official fast or *fa-jing* movements, try to avoid the common tendency to make the postures look and feel more martial. If you tense up when speeding up to strike, you will likely make your progress slower, not faster. Martially, it is not a good idea to wiggle or twist excessively when doing *fa-jing* although this is often the initial natural result of starting to loosen the waist. Real *fa-jing* is subtle and comes from the convergence of a number of skills and physical attributes—it is not just being rubbery.

As these forms are meant to be done quickly, it can very soon get out of hand in the sense that moving quickly is conducive to striking your forearms and the more vulnerable *dim-mak* points a little too hard. It is easy to get injured if you are striking your own elbow joints instead of the fleshy part of the muscles of the upper forearm, and even if your aim is accurate, the amount of force used is easy to overdo.

Similarly, striking the air is problematic for most beginner and intermediate levels practitioners. They are likely to hyper-extend their elbow joints in their zeal or have the energy they generate rebound or get stuck in their own body if they are still a little stiff while moving through the forms. *Fa-jing* practice with any intensity should be saved for practising on a mitt, shield, or heavy bag so that there is something to absorb whatever power you are capable of.

Using the eyes

Be aware that the eyes always follow the active hand in solo practice. This implies that you have to know where you are going in a visual sense. It is not just a question of moving around a circle—sometimes you are working to the centre, sometimes obliquely to the circle itself. It is also true that the eyes must be lively. You should lead the spins and major directional changes with the mind, both eyes, and the head.

Being attentive both visually and mentally is essential. If the performer has presence and is attentive of what he or she is doing when practising a form, then it can be assumed that the form is being approached with some quality in mind and in a traditional manner.

Pacing

It can take many months, if not years, to ingrain the proper basic body mechanics of walking and the details of the postures within the forms themselves. In the beginning, it is better to try and do the movements in a relatively slow and mechanical manner. I think that it is very important to take your time learning this form, especially if you are only working from videos or have infrequent access to a good bagua instructor.

Once you have mastered these, practise with smoothness and fluidity in mind. However, remember that the postures within each change don't flow one into the other. There are subtle and less subtle pauses at the end of each martial set.

Walk slowly and evenly between the changes in the Circular Form. You can use more speed while moving though the postures that make up each change. Again, it is useful advice to remember to practise relatively slowly, although this is not Yang Style Slow Form practice, and it is possible to try to do the movements too slowly. Many of the spinning or turning postures will be easier if you use a little speed while trying to learn how to use them.

Similarly, the pace of the Linear Form is variable in the sense that it can be done very quickly or relatively slowly, but never as slowly as the Yang Style Slow Form. I have seen some benefit to practising this form by stopping at the end of each individual fighting method while going quickly and smoothly through each method. This helps to teach the students learning the form where the martial "chunks" are, and to get them ready to practise interactively with each other.

Frequency/Intensity of Practice

It should go without saying that it is essential to practise the forms regularly, preferably every day, if you want to see progress! However, it is better to focus your full attention on that one repetition rather than to do them several times in a row while daydreaming, or just going through the motions.

It is worth repeating that part of what makes bagua an internal system is the attention that must be paid to being attentive in one's practice. It has also been my experience over the years that intermediate level students tend to have trouble with the idea of paying attention to what they are doing once they have learned the forms physically well enough so that they can practise more or less automatically.

Daydreaming or not paying attention tends to settle into their daily practice, while quality of attentiveness goes out the door. Doing a form competently should always feel and look to an observer like you are doing it well for the first time or the last. Perhaps, this is an attitude to hold onto to help you focus on your daily training to make it really worthwhile. Quality over quantity, so to speak.…

Space Considerations

One of the curses of many of the traditional forms for modern practitioners is the amount of clear space needed to practise—your living room usually won't do. Many of us don't live in an area where the weather permits year-round outdoor practice, especially when moving quickly, lifting knees, and kicking preclude practising on snowy/muddy/icy surfaces.

There are no easy answers to this dilemma. The circle walking and circular forms are marginally more economical of space than the linear and weapons forms. These are important considerations for modern students. It is a waste of time to start learning forms that you can never practise properly for lack of space to do so.

Aesthetics vs Function

I have often been told and read that "real" martial artists think that training to make their forms and postures look aesthetically appealing is a waste of time that could be better spent doing more conditioning exercises or practising combative methods. Conversely, those who prefer the more genteel approach tend to argue that the movements should be beautiful, graceful, and that relaxation, sensitivity and a calm mind are ultimately more important than strength and athletic ability. Finally, those who choose to compete tend to argue that physical prowess and flexibility are at least as important as anything else. Who is correct?

I don't think that there is a simple answer, and an investigation of this issue should start with the concept of expressing the Three Harmonies, also called the Three Co-ordinations, in your movement and postures when doing any internal art. Possession of this quality has two complimentary aspects: the Internal Harmonies refer to the *Xin* (heart/desire for action) being in accord with the *Yi* (intent/the will to act), and, in turn, the *Yi* harmonising with the *Qi* (internal energy) which transmits that intent, which then harmonises with the *Li* (power/the actual physical expression of the posture).

The Three External Harmonies are the co-ordinated expression of the *Yi* in that the hands are co-ordinating with the feet, the elbows with the knees, and the shoulders with the hips. In other words, if you pay attention to each movement and posture of the forms or techniques you are practising, you are co-ordinating the internal with the external, and this is the key aim in any internal training.

To put it more simply, the Three Internal Harmonies are about having a clear purpose in each aspect of your practice and of being truly attentive. The experts would argue that if you have been taught well and are trying to practise well, you will have a constant expression of the Three Harmonies, no matter what the main focus (combative, spiritual, competitive) is in your training. If this happens, the movement of your body and spirit will be attractive from a visual perspective to the casual and the trained observer because you will be harmonious.

Strangely enough, this is also the foundation for effective fighting as you can't defend yourself against a committed and skilful attacker unless your body is balanced, smooth, and harmonious, as well as motivated by a unified spirit and intent. I know, this is a difficult concept to get as common sense might argue that theatrical gymnastics and expansive movements are better suited to competition routines than fighting. And real combative skills have to be harsh and simple to be effective.

To compound the issue, the types of physical skills necessary to do Chinese Opera or compete in a kung-fu/taiji tournament in forms are the foundation of combative training (i.e., you have to be strong, healthy, and co-ordinated to defend yourself). And even the simplest and harshest combative action can be done so well so that it appears magically easy.

However, it is important to remember that such skill does not come automatically just because you can express the Three Harmonies through your solo practice! You cannot learn interactive fighting/pushing skills without practising such methods with a variety of partners under competent supervision. It is also true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and you may, perhaps, have to be male to appreciate the beauty in combat between skilled opponents.

There is also the issue of symmetry that relates both to the beauty and martial function. Bagua normally takes the approach that it is essential to practise the forms in a symmetrical manner, as it lessens the chance of overworking and stressing one side of the body. So, each change in the Circular Form and every fighting method will be practised on both sides of the body.

However, as to martial function, it makes more sense, especially in terms of making the most of your practice sessions, to focus on using your dominate side. Human beings, with few exceptions, cannot learn to be equally ambidextrous, and it seems like a waste of time to try to do so. Of course, this does not mean that you ignore your left side if you are right-handed, and vice versa. It only means that you focus on the whole body usage that makes the most of your strong side. Any posture/method from bagua will work against a variety of attacks on the open and the closed sides—if you understand it well enough. Symmetry also implies that quite often both hands and arms will finish holding the same posture even though only one was being used actively at the end of the application. Strangely enough, not only does the posture look wrong to the practised observer if there is not such symmetry, but the application itself will suffer. Don't take my word for it—experiment for yourself.

Anyone, whether beginner or expert, can appreciate the inherent quality of movement and presence when a master does form the way it should always look (and so rarely does). I was telling a colleague of mine recently that the highlights of my three decades of martial arts training have been seeing the occasional example of outstanding skills done by masters like Erle Montaigue, Sam Masich, Tim Cartmell, and others. These inspirational demonstrations of the Three Harmonies in action have periodically reminded me of why I am still doing this marvellous nonsense after so many years of training and teaching.

However, there is no need for us to feel inferior because we cannot necessarily reach such heights, as each of us can strive to demonstrate, each according to his or her ability and interest, that same expression of the Three Harmonies in our own daily practice.

CONCLUSION

It has been my experience that the Circular Form can take almost a year for the average beginner to learn if he or she attends class twice a week. The Linear Form is even more tedious to learn. It has so many methods, each must be practised on both sides when doing the form as one long set, as taught by Erle. But mastery of any traditional internal art is a life long journey, not a quick trip to McDonalds!

Many modern sport martial artists, as well as those who compete in mixed martial arts fighting events, tend to look down their battered noses at the value of solo forms and deride them as being a waste of time that could be better spent on sparring and conditioning. And there is a lot of truth to this, especially if you consider how low many modern bagua teachers have drifted in terms of their potential martial effectiveness anywhere except with their own students in a classroom setting.

However, when approached properly, solo forms are the martial "short hand" of bagua practitioners and provide a way of remembering, practising, and teaching your vocabulary of techniques in the long run. Just be careful that your forms don't become meaningless dances, and that you don't neglect the other aspects of your training. The three points of the bagua triangle should be: qigong, forms, and applications.

Chapter Four

Fundamentals: Basic Martial Training

Once you have been practising the qigong and studying the solo forms for some time, you will normally begin training the martial methods. By then, you will probably have realised that any aspect of bagua is harder if competently done than it would first appear to the uninitiated.

In fact, I will tell you the secrets of any aspect of traditional bagua at no extra charge: have good instruction, train hard while paying attention to the quality of that practice—not just how many hours you put into one session, be patient.

Having aptitude is certainly an asset, but it is less essential than having the three aspects of what I call "The Bagua Triangle." In fact, I will tease you a little by hinting here that understanding triangulation is also the secret of understanding the famous circularity of bagua whose study is, in many ways, the study of mathematics and physics.

What Makes Bagua Different in Martial Terms

As I said in an earlier chapter, bagua has some rather interesting approaches to combat. The most direct is to attack the aggressor's arms or legs as he advances to attack you. Many people, even those with fighting experience, will find it painful and disorienting to have their limbs struck. In combat, one of the key tactics (don't take my word for it, read Sun Tzu's Art of War) is to surprise the enemy and do the unexpected. Of course, this method works best if you have considerable skill and are not much smaller than the person attacking you.

When size matters, and it always does in self-defence, the other bagua approach is to move out of the line of attack to avoid resisting the incoming mass and resultant power and deflect it off-course while counter-attacking. This does not mean getting out of the way. Doing so will only work in a classroom setting, where your partner isn't really following you with the intent to harm you for real.

Getting out of the way in a bagua-like manner implies that you are connected to the opponent with at least one of your forearms or palms and have not moved needlessly out of

range. It also means that you move diagonally forward, not to the sides or directly forward. Stepping diagonally backwards is a second-class option that only works under certain situations.

Done smoothly and competently, moving forward diagonally is what makes you look as if you have circled around your opponent to be in the position of advantage behind him or her. You didn't really believe that walking the circle meant that you would circle the opponent like the Indians, riding around the wagon train that had pulled into a defensive circle in bad Western movies? Circle stepping in any context teaches you about getting out of the way properly, not about walking around in circles.

Getting back to the original idea of having two major approaches to dealing with an attack. Ideally, you will learn to do both types of tactics in your training sessions even though a much smaller person would be best to use only the avoidance method when dealing with a larger attacker.

It is also important to remember the difference between working on the open and the closed sides of an opponent. When fighting on the inside, and sometimes you have no choice, your opponent has just as much access and opportunity to attack your vulnerable areas as you have to attack his. But, if you are behind or outside your opponent's arms, the opposite does not hold true. You have access and opportunity to attack his vulnerable areas, he has much less access to yours. In addition, you have superior positional advantage to take the opponent down without much struggle, as well as the option to escape if need be.

In order to end a fight you need to dominate the opponent. If your opponent is bigger and stronger, or has some practical skills himself, it will often be very difficult to do. This is why when two people fight, the bigger and stronger fighter usually wins. If you are technically far superior to your opponent, you can most likely put him down despite a significant size or weight difference. If you're not more skilled than the larger or heavier opponent, his greater reach and greater mass in motion make it unlikely that you will prevail.

By the way, you should always assume that your hypothetical opponent is dangerous, stronger and technically sound, and that having superior skills may be the only way you can win the encounter.

It is also important to remember that bagua is an art that uses the open hand in preference to the fist—particularly when attacking the head. The rationale is that all your opponent has to do against a closed fist attack is duck a few inches, and you will end up connecting with his skull with a real danger of breaking your fingers or wrist. These are the most common injuries faced by Western boxers despite having taped their hands and wearing gloves. The other common problem is landing your closed fist on an opponent's elbows if he covers his ribs effectively with elbows, which are very strong and bony joints.

With considerable time and practice, palm strikes, or those using the heel of the hand, become preferable for these reasons. Erle teaches three main versions of the palm strike for slightly different martial purposes. Finally, the open hand can be used to grasp vital points or lock up the key joints of the limbs. The bagua style we follow favours open hand techniques, but each of the two forms contains one closed fist technique to remind us that this weapon can be useful under certain situations and cannot be ignored completely.

The funny footwork used in the Slip Step is also a way of training the martial use of your own feet and shins as offensive and defensive tools. One of the hallmarks of bagua is the way in which a practitioner uses his or her feet while doing toe-in steps, to trap an attacker's legs and balance whenever possible while in close range. If you are crowding an attacker without tensing up or losing your balance, it will be more difficult for the aggressor to continue their attack effectively. The same applies if you are kicking their shins, stepping on their feet or striking the vulnerable areas of the inside and outside of their knees while doing toe-out steps, with hands doing the necessary martial work.

The Basic Martial Curriculum

Developing some competency in the following training methods is essential if you hope to begin understanding bagua as a martial art. I have tried my best to remain true to Erle's instruction while blending in methods from other instructors that seemed useful.

In this context, I have tried to live by some very good advice I received from one of my former taiji instructors, Alan Weiss. He suggested, as I continued to train and develop my understanding of taiji and bagua, that I focus on being a first-rate Michael Babin rather than a second-rate Erle Montaigue.

Consequently, my interpretation of the forms and methods that do come from Erle, without doubt, reflect both my own aptitudes and inadequacies. Don't blame him if you disagree with what you read, or what I have taught you!

The forms and methods are listed in the order you would normally learn from me. The text on each is designed to supplement, and not replace, the guidance of competent one-on-one instruction. Consequently, I make no apologies for being vague or incomplete in my advice on these various methods.

If you are reading this and have never had my guidance or that of a competent bagua instructor, whether he or she is in the WTBA or not; it will be hard to gain more than a superficial understanding of the following text.

Basic Warm-up Methods

The following exercises are all used in traditional bagua styles, although none come from Erle Montaigue. I have picked them up from a variety of sources (workshops and videos). Before beginning any martial training it is a good idea to get the torso and limbs warmed up. Similarly, when you have finished such training, it is smart to do a little cooling down with a few of these exercises or whatever stretches you may prefer.

If you are using these exercises as a way of preparing for qigong, form work, or martial training, then you should do them in the order shown, starting with Holding Up the Heavens and finishing with Shaking the Body. If you have been doing standing qigong first, then I would recommend that you start with Shaking the Body and then follow the order shown below.

These exercises are designed to strengthen and loosen the body and teach particular body mechanics. Some of them also introduce specific *jings*, or martial principles; but don't think

of these as being techniques. They are ways of starting to understand bagua principles that apply to both self-healing and the combat methods.

Don't do these exercises too slowly or too quickly. And even at a moderate speed, you won't normally try to co-ordinate your breathing with your actions on a conscious level unless specifically told to in certain exercises. Please ensure that you don't accidentally hold your breath for extended periods. Lack of oxygen leads to muscle tension, and vice versa. If you find that you get breathless doing any of these, you are probably going too fast, doing too many repetitions, or holding the breath.

Always begin with the quiet standing posture before stepping out to the left side with the left foot. Reverse that to return to the quiet standing posture. Do four or eight repetitions of each exercise on each side.

Exercise One: *Holding Up the Heavens/Strengthens the Spine and Arms.* This gently twists the spine and helps to increase or maintain the elasticity of the spine, shoulders and sides of the torso. With the arms lengthening up over the head, a natural abdominal lift is created, which tones the abdominal walls. The internal organs are also gently massaged by the rhythmic breathing. The chest is expanded. Pressure is taken off the heart and lungs by opening the chest cavity. With your knees straight, but not locked, interlace the fingers, palms up, in front of the waist and raise the hands slowly until the palms turn to face upwards when the backs of the hands are directly above the top of the head. As you do this, inhale while letting the stomach muscles gently contract inward and upwards, pushing your interlocked hands straight up over your head. Push them up until your arms are straight. Gently exhale and relax the stomach muscles and, as you do so, let the body turn to the left. Be sure that you have the feeling of lengthening up, arms as well; and that your hips do not move. Also be sure that you do not collapse or slump as you exhale. Try not to lean to the side. Relax. Inhale, letting the stomach muscles gently contract inward as you turn back to face forward, always lengthening up. Repeat to the right side. Remember to keep the hips from turning. Keep lengthening up. Exhale slowly, and as you do so, let your hands drop slowly to the sides while maintaining feeling of extension to your fingertips.

Exercise Two: *Rotating the Grindstone/Co-ordinating Posture and the Bow Stance.* Step diagonally to the left, as your hands "hold the grindstone" (as if your hands are cupping a stone shaped like a bowl held upside down) at waist height. Circle the hands in a counter-clockwise fashion while shifting the weight forward and back. Inhale as you come back, exhale as you go forward. Do four or eight repetitions, and then retract the left foot and hands to the starting spot. Repeat on the right, but with the hands "grinding" in a clockwise fashion. Don't bend and straighten your elbows once you are "holding onto the grindstone." The idea is to use the co-ordinated movement of your waist and spine to move your arms in the required pattern. Don't lean too far forward when in the Bow Stance, and straighten up as you shift the weight back. Do an equal number of repetitions on each side.

Exercise Three: *Bending the Heavenly Stem/Stretches and Strengthens the Lower Back and Legs.* Step to the side with the left foot into a moderate Horse Stance and position your arms as if you were holding a beach ball in front of the torso, with the left hand underneath and the right hand above. Exhale while rolling and wrapping the left

hand overhead, appearing to lean back as far as possible as the right hand drops simultaneously. (N.B. Your lower back drops, the inguinal folds crease, and the knees and legs do most of the actual work.) As you straighten up, inhale and then, switching the hands again, lean forward so that your torso forms a 90 degree angle with your legs. Your right palm will be pushing forward, and your spine will be as straight as possible. Keep the chin tucked in at all times. Remember to exhale as you bend forward or back, and to inhale whenever you are straightening. Do an equal number of repetitions on each side.

Exercise Four: ***Wrap & Chop/Trains Co-ordination Between the Upper and Lower Body.*** Stepping to the side with the left foot, assume as wide a Horse Stance as possible. Shift/swivel from side to side, turning smoothly on the heels (don't let the toes lift too high as you do this), as you first chop with the edge of one hand before "wrapping" the arms and finishing with a second chop with the other hand. It is important to remember that your torso and arms will have to move faster than your waist and legs if you are to accomplish two chops on each swivel. At the end of each swivel, the rear hand should feel as if it is holding an opponent's wrist that you caught after having intercepted a punch with your initial chop. Your front hand does the final damage—feel with the "hammer" portion of the lower outside edge of the Dragon Palm. Allow your head to turn with the torso, but remember that your eyes and attention must stay to the front where the opponent would be standing if you were doing this as martial technique. Do an equal number of repetitions on each side.

Exercise Five: ***Twisting the Tea Cups/Trains flexibility in the Arms and Shoulders.*** This method is done in a moderate Horse Stance (*ma-bu*), and only the waist and arms will move. Start on the left side and imagine that you extend your left palm—don't drop your invisible cup of tea cradled in the palm of that hand—by twisting the wrist so that the fingers go to the left side, and then forward and upwards over the head, and then down to the front before coming back to stop momentarily by the left hip. "Don't spill your tea" while doing this, and you will go a long way to stretching and relaxing your shoulders, elbows and wrists. (N.B. the advanced version of this dictates that you never let one hand rest by the hip while the other moves—both will be constantly moving until you have done an equal number of repetitions on each side.) The other way to make your training more challenging is to hold round objects of varying sizes and weights while practising. I have used croquet balls and Bocce balls as improvised bagua spheres. The heavier the object, the better the training in terms of building strength and flexibility, but be careful that you don't overdo this. I have seen old photos of masters walking the circle while holding and twirling stone balls of impressive sizes. So, this is a traditional, and challenging, way to practise. Do an equal number of repetitions on each side.

Exercise Six: ***Changing the Guard/Trains the use of the Changing Step as well as how to use the Palms.*** This method uses the posture recommended for the advanced standing qigong method I described earlier, Push the Palms, but instead of holding each side for a certain number of breaths you retract and extend each side alternating from left to right. For example, this necessitates that you lift and retract the left foot as you retract the left arm. Place the left heel back next to the right heel, and then extend the right arm and leg. This teaches you to do a Changing Step, which is a very valuable way of mobilising the momentum of your body weight when you don't have enough room to step more normally.

It also teaches you to lift your front foot before retracting it, so that you could avoid having it trapped by someone else trying to immobilise your leg with a toe-in stance. Do an equal number of repetitions on each side.

Exercise Seven: ***Rising and Falling/Strengthens and loosens the hips and buttocks.*** This method is done while in a moderate Horse Stance and consists of dropping the torso by bending the knees and folding the inguinal area while exhaling. As you do this, extend your arms forward, palms up, and to the height of the shoulders. Don't bend your knees excessively and don't drop so low that your thighs exceed being parallel to the floor. You can lean forward slightly as you drop, as long as the spine is straight, and you don't incline forwards excessively. As you inhale you will reverse this process and rise up to your original position.

Exercise Eight: ***Shaking the Body/Relaxes the Body and Stimulates the Hormone-producing Organs.*** Pause for a few moments after completing the previous exercise and, with arms still hanging at the sides, bend both knees slightly and start gently vibrating the body from head to feet. In the beginning you may need to start this process by bouncing up and down by alternately bending and straightening the knees. Keep the tip of your tongue pressed lightly upwards on the upper palate, but do not force the mouth to remain closed, or hold your breath, or try to co-ordinate it in any way with the shaking and trembling. Don't let the latter become violent spams. You should feel a mild trembling of the muscles and tissues in all parts of the body. Do this for roughly a minute in a continuous manner. This ecercise is relaxing once you get the hang of it. It helps to regulate glandular function for the purpose of building helth and preventing sexual dysfuncion. Particularly in terms of traditional Taoist thought, the most important hormons are those produced by the sexual organs, as these are used in the production of *Qi*. In addition, shaking relaxes the muscles and joints in general.

TWO-PERSON TRAINING METHODS

I shouldn't have to say this to anyone with any real martial experience, but since many modern students don't fall into that category, and are a little hard of hearing, I will shout:

YOU HAVE TO PRACTISE THE INTERACTIVE METHODS WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS TO HAVE ANY HOPE OF LEARNING HOW THEY MIGHT WORK IN A CONFRONTATIONAL SITUATION.

Sad to say that there are still many internal arts teachers who tell their students that you don't have to sweat, or get bruised, or make contact with your training partner to learn how to apply the postures and principles of an internal art. I don't know what is worse: those misguided or fraudulent teachers making money and gratifying their egos by teaching rubbish, or the many students who swallow rubbish because they would rather believe that wearing spiffy costumes, walking in circles any which way, and being able to discuss the *I-Ching* can compensate for working hard physically.

Rooting/Grounding Methods (Stationery and Moving)

Rooting and sensitivity exercises are essential foundation skills in the martial practice of any internal arts, although they should *not* become the golden idols, which so many modern instructors seem to worship. Most are relatively safe and useful methods of training stu-

dents how to read another person's body movements through contact, while creating and maintaining a stable lower centre of gravity in themselves.

However, it is essential for instructor and students alike to remember that such games create skills that do not, by themselves, automatically bring self-defence abilities. Being sensitive and having an immovable root can be a liability if your partner doesn't play by the rules (e.g. by suddenly moving to get behind you, or simply striking) and you are unable to adapt instantly to such cheating.

In regards to the latter, please remember that the *other* side succeeds by cheating. When *you* do something unexpected, having done so is sound strategy. Isn't rationalisation wonderful? The exercises that we do are designed to help the student physically understand how important it is to be upright and firm, yet relaxed, while always having the potential for balanced movement.

In one stationary version of this exercise, one student assumes and holds what I call the Guard Posture while his or her partner pushes slowly and a bit stiffly (at least until the recipient gets the hang of relaxed heaviness) on either a forearm, shoulder, or the abdomen. All the student has to do is stand there without moving with as little physical effort or movement as possible.

The person being pushed upon should imagine that they are like a child or pet that resists being picked up by going dead weight. Try lifting a 30 lb toddler or dog that doesn't want up. They suddenly feel like they weigh twice or three times there actual weight. That is because their relative relaxation makes it harder for you to find the "stiff bits" that can operate as the fulcrum for you to lever them upwards. Similarly, which is harder to lift—20 pounds of iron chain or a similar weight of iron plate?

In the moving version of this method, your partner pushes properly from the waist and with connectivity to the ground while stepping through your space. The person reacting to that has to stick to their incoming force and deflect it off course as he steps diagonally to the corner or swivel on one leg and move the other. One arm comes up to help you deflect and keep your partner's hand away from your torso; the other pretends to strike the pusher's torso or head.

There are a variety of martial applications possible, but try to keep it simple and non-competitive. Remember to push and step at the same time, and experiment with how much force you give your partner. You should find that stepping and pushing stiffly makes you fall forward somewhat or lurch if your partner applies the correct pressure and method while swivelling out of the way of your pressure.

The Conditioning Applications Set

Both partners start by standing in a moderate Horse Stance (*ma-bu* is a foundational stance in most forms of Chinese martial arts) and facing each other with their palms pressing down by their hips. They should be positioned just out of punching range for the taller partner. Starting this way minimises the chances of accidental contact to the wrong targets.

One person is designated the leader, and he or she initiates the movement of each method in this little two-person set—save one, so that the leader doesn't get complacent and forget

that there are always exceptions to every rule. The goal is for the other person to play "follow the leader" and counter whatever technique or footwork is used against him with the same method. After having gone around once, the other person can take the leadership role, and the exercise can continue this way indefinitely, with both people alternating in the lead role for a preset period of time.

This is my variation of a common training method for beginners in other styles, and it teaches the student to defend with what I call "grinding power" with the outside of the forearms (primarily Number Four and Number Six palms) while deflecting the attack, rather than confronting it. It also teaches how to use the most common stepping and directional change methods and to follow properly—not too soon, not too late—and to use your body to pull, rather than your arm alone.

Remember to take turns leading. You will discover, it is very difficult to use the right timing to counter at the correct moment even when you know what the other person will be doing. As with any basic exercise, it is easy to let yourself accelerate and to use too much brute strength, as opposed to learning how to deflect or counter by striking when this is appropriate.

Although it is not done excessively, this exercise is a good introduction to learning to take some force with your arms and to not let such impacts affect your mobility or ability to stay functionally relaxed.

Joining Legs: Each person will stand in front and a little to one side of his partner, on one leg while connecting the outside of the other lifted knee to the outside of his partner's lifted knee. The heels of both lifted legs should be in contact. You should connect the wrist/forearm on the same side to your partner's wrist/forearm.

In the beginning it can be a bit of a struggle for both people just to stand there connected without one or both losing their balance. While doing either of the two exercises discussed here, you should switch supporting legs whenever one person falls over or loses the contest. Do not this exercise for too long at any one time.

Vertical Power Exercise: This two person exercise strengthens the legs, particularly the hips. It improves co-ordination and balance—particularly the ability to make vertical circles with the hip being the axis of the wheel. It is important to lean forward and back without compromising your ability to move or remain in a state of equilibrium, even when leaning at weird angles. In bagua, vertical power is quite often used to initiate a kick, or to evade a head strike from the opponent's hand. Remember to use the waist and hip on the supporting leg to do most of the work. You can lead either with the hand or the hooking leg—but do not let the action become simultaneous. Erle doesn't emphasise this tactical application, but it is common in other competent versions of bagua, and I think it is important to be able to do it.

Horizontal Power Exercise: Like the first, this exercise strengthens the legs, particularly the hips, and improves co-ordination and balance, especially the ability to use horizontal turning and twisting to deflect upper body and low foot attacks.

There are also ways of practising this where you practise kicking attacks and defences, but that is more suited to advanced students and resembles in some ways the "sticky legs" exercises used in some Chen Styles and in some Wing-Chun variations.

The Eight Wrist Releases

This is basic training on using the Eight Mother Palms to defend against a passive grab by your partner. A couple of the methods that I teach are slightly different from those taught by Erle if you refer to his videos or books.

Remember to stretch the Dragon Palms when your partner starts to squeeze/grab your arm, as on the street this would normally be an unconscious and unintended warning signal that the grabber is about to hit you with the other hand. Use this to your advantage. To do this, your attention must be focussed on "listening" at the point of contact. Being sensitive to subtle physical cues is an essential aspect of any internal art.

Try to get used to doing the correct follow-up for each method, and to use the right method for the appropriate grab. With competence and long term training, you will find that each method can be used, usually with very little modification, against a variety of common grabs, not just those you are accustomed to.

Be careful that you don't use brute force—either as the dummy or the person practising the method. Also be careful when in the dummy role that you don't remain too relaxed, especially if you have learned elsewhere to grip strongly despite being relaxed. In the beginning, the student needs some stiffness in the grab to be able to make it work relatively easily.

You will probably find, as you develop some skill, that it becomes a natural reaction to start countering whatever is being done to you. Try to learn to turn such skills off and on, as you don't do the less experienced student any favours by making it harder than necessary for him or her to explore each of the eight basic wrist releases.

The Eight Kicking Methods

You must learn a variety of coping methods for dealing with the possibility of low kicks aimed at the feet (the pain can be distracting, or result in knockout, or sweep you to the ground), shins (the pain is distracting), or at the knees (a shattered joint makes it hard to continue a fight, or a locked-out knee makes it liable that you be thrown or imbalanced).

At the highest levels you attack when kicked or move the target leg out of harm's way, however, you should also practise a variety of ways of kicking the attacking leg.

That's what this little four-method exercise is for. In the beginning it is okay to hold each other's wrists to help maintain balance. Remember to swivel on the ball of the supporting foot in order to gain short-range power for some of the kicks. It is wise for the "attacker" to wear good quality shin pads even if you have reasonably good control of how hard you strike. Switch turns and partners frequently, so that one person's shins are not prematurely bruised or hurt excessively. A certain amount of toughening is good, but nerve damage or hair-line fractures in the leg bones are not!

HAMMER HANDS APPLICATIONS SET

This training method is a bit more complex than the Conditioning Set and I have named it Hammer Hands in honour of Erle, whose hands certainly can feel like hammers when he uses them against you, even in friendly training.

I have mixed feelings about sparring or applications sets. Some that I have seen in other styles of bagua are ridiculous in the complexity of their movement or require a level of co-operation from your partner that would merit an Academy Award for acting. Others are simple in design, but work best against attacking methods common in the China of a century ago. You are unlikely to encounter them in the present day.

It is also easy for such sets to become an overly choreographed ritual which brings a false sense of security as to your self-defence ability. However, competent examples can provide a real challenge to the intermediate level student as, unlike a solo form, forgetting the next move might mean that you get hit in the nose by accident. When accidents such as those just mentioned happen, it is good to have developed the ability to use controlled contact, maintaining the concept of sustained effort for technique after technique without becoming breathless or stiffening your movements, and learning applications on a body level instead of as an intellectual abstraction.

In fact, you must, in some ways, do many of the specific techniques incorrectly for your partner's safety, unless both participants are of equal size and skill—incorrectly in the sense of not going too fast or using explosive energy. In relation to this caveat, it is also true that flowing from one technique to the other requires that neither partner ever finishes a technique. If you don't have competent instruction, you may never actually get a feel for how each method could work if it wasn't countered skilfully.

Two-person sets, whether simple or complex, act as a martial bridge for many students to bring them to the edge of spontaneity in a martial sense. Conversely, if two-person sets become a choreography, as is often the case, then the martial lessons to be learned tend to be superficial. I have always found it interesting in my own students that those who take most naturally to free sparring of any kind usually have the least patience or aptitude for structured two-person exercises. On the other hand, most modern students seem to need the structure to make progress even though most have trouble transcending it. Pay attention to the following points when practising Hammer Hands:

- In keeping with the often encountered tradition in the Chinese internal arts, this form is not learned solo first and then practised with a partner—you can only do it with an instructor or a peer. This means that you must have basic skills at the solo and interactive methods to be able to retain any of it between practice sessions. It is an indication of your level of development as to how well you remember the part of the form you know from class to class.
- Train slowly at first with light touch contact; it may be many months before you can use more speed and power safely.

- Many of the better defensive methods will only work easily when you learn to move away from the incoming force only as much as necessary, rather than running away from it.
- Whenever your feet are together, you should look double-weighted *but not be that way.* The combative idea is to try and deceive your opponent, so that he or she doesn't know for sure which direction your next step will be, even though your sparring partner should!
- Most of what seem to be blocks are meant to be striking deflections aimed at vital points of the anatomy—*use care when doing them.*
- Most of what seem to be pulling movements are really negative strikes, but be very careful when training with a partner, as you can give them whiplash (in martial sense) if he is stiff. *Use care when doing them.*
- Most of the interactions can easily be divided into a defensive part and a counteroffensive part—but remember that the majority are really one action when done well or explosively, if you don't have to worry about harming your partner.

Form Applications

I have mentioned how important it was to develop some concept of what each posture means on a martial level, even if it is only a mental understanding. However, to learn any on a meaningful martial level, you will have to isolate and practise individual techniques many times with a variety of training partners, and at a variety of intensities as your understanding and skills develop.

Such interaction, even when done slowly and carefully, complicates and changes your feel for the mechanics of each posture. Now you really begin to learn where your hands and feet should be at any one time, how to get them there using bagua principles, and how to relax under pressure.

In the long run, any martial skill you develop will result from internalising the principles and a few techniques, as opposed to learning many applications on a superficial level. This small arsenal can eventually become internal (or instinctive, or subconscious, or conditioned reflex—call it what you like).

One way to do this is to select a few postures from the solo form(s) that you do particularly well or like the most, and practise them on your own and with a partner. Try to pick methods that cover attacks from the most common angles and from both the right and left sides. If you can eventually make them work while being attacked with some speed and power then you're on the right track.

Remember that there is really no one interpretation of each method (although some experts would, no doubt, argue with this). I believe that each posture has one or more interpretations as a defence against either being struck or grabbed; however, each will also have countless variations depending on the skills and strengths of the practitioner, as well as the angle and complexity of attack.

Learning How to Strike with the Palms

One of the problems with learning the basic martial usage of the various palm shapes is the natural tendency to confine your practising to "striking the air" while doing forms, or practising individual methods by yourself, or with little or no contact on a training partner.

Unfortunately, it is impossible, not just difficult, to learn how to efficiently and safely strike with the open hands, if you don't practise making contact with a target of some kind—whether that target is a focus mitt, a padded shield, a heavy bag, or *makiwara,* or a training partner wearing body armour so that he or she can be safely struck. In fact all of these also create a natural progression in learning how to use greater and greater amounts of power in your palm strikes while also maintaining the integrity of the various methods themselves.

It is useful to think of palm strikes as falling into three categories: blunt impact, percussive and penetrating.

- The first is a strike with the heel of the palm driven with the weight of the body. When done properly, this causes great movement in the heavy bag and makes a dull noise on impact.
- The second, with the fingers and edges of the hand forming a hollow in the palm, is driven more with the use of the waist, as well as a subtle shifting of weight, and makes a louder, sharper popping sound on impact, and the heavy bag tends to shudder rather than swing.
- The third method begins like the second, but then the palm thrusts forward once the edge of the hand and fingers make contact. It has a distinctive sound as well, and makes the bag shudder in a different way than the second method.

All three methods are worthwhile from a martial perspective, and the third is the hardest to generate, as doing it successfully implies that you are able to do the second method well in the first place. When done on a focus mitt, you will know, you are getting somewhere when the impact of the last two seems to penetrate the padding even though you are not winding up from a great distance to generate momentum. As with all such training methods, it is best to learn and practise them under the supervision of someone who can actually do them with some skill and grace.

A traditional way of practising striking was to practise on a tree trunk, padded or otherwise, or on a heavy pole that had been sunk into the earth for that purpose. There was also a supposedly advanced way of practising, in which the bagua student navigated around and through a pattern of such posts (often called Nine Palace Training) while practising a prearranged or spontaneous pattern of strikes on the hard resilience of the posts.

Erle also teaches and has videos on the use of what he calls the "bagua wooden man," although making the requisite shape for his wooden man would not be easy unless you are a skilled woodworker. Still, the methods he teaches for use on this apparatus can be adapted for use on a wing-chun wooden man, or done while circling a heavy bag. I recommend the videos if you are interested in training how to strike, and must do so largely on your own.

As with any aspect of learning to apply your martial skills in a potentially effective manner from a self-defence point of view, you cannot ignore the necessity of learning how to do

your strikes on a target that resists—in some way—the impact. From a mechanical point of view alone, it can take some pain and bruising to learn how to strike with an open hand without bruising your own bones or straining your wrists and elbows—even when doing it on a target that doesn't fight back, except passively.

It is also important to remember, how hard and how well you can hit, ultimately depends on how well you can reposition your body in relation to the opponent just before striking them. This use of timing and distancing is very difficult to learn, and tends to take the longest to learn unless you are born with considerable aptitude for such martial attributes. Let me put it simply, you may be able to strike like a battering ram or with the force of a whip, but if you can't get within the correct range to do so without being blown out of the water by the other fellow, then your palm striking ability won't do you much good.

In other words, striking properly is one factor among many that have to be trained and fall into place before you can be as effective a martial artist as your potential allows.

Uprooting Exercises

This exercise begins with two partners facing each other at arm's length while standing in a moderate Horse Stance (feet shoulder width apart and, in the beginning, each person is double-weighted). The idea is to push, pull, or lure the other person into being obliged to move their feet without the "doer" moving their feet. Using this stance limits how much you can cheat by using your leg muscles to compensate for a lack of use of the waist and hips to control the knees, or for failing to shift from side to side properly to help your upper body efforts.

Uprooting should be approached as a game in which you try to help each other to fall over or move the feet. The idea is not to force the person to move, but to guide them into such a position that they would move their feet or topple over. Ideally, both partners should be of the same sex, height, and weight until some real yielding and redirecting skills are formed.

It is also useful to have one partner do all of the attacking while the other can only redirect the incoming force and not counter-attack. Then they can switch roles for an equal amount of time.

It is also useful to practise uprooting while using a short stick. Rattan escrima batons make good sticks for this exercise. They are the correct length and light enough so that you don't have to worry as much about accidental contact.

Practising this way, the idea is to get possession of the stick while ideally making the other person lose their balance and move his or her feet at the same time. As long as you move relatively slowly, it is good practice to try to use the stick as a lever in locking out your partner's arms if you can do this safely. Practising with a stick is a quick way to learn how counterproductive it can be to not be able to switch grips quickly and smoothly.

Joining Arms

This can be the most basic way of learning to apply bagua type martial methods, as well as ultimately the most advanced method; however, both partners must have considerable skill to avoid injuring each other while still practising in a meaningful manner. I think of the

Conditioning Set and Hammer Hands as being two initial rungs up the ladder to understand circling your partner while joining arms.

In the beginning, you only use inside and outside changes, as this minimises the chance of injury to anything except the wrists and forearms (N.B. Remember that you must never strike offensively or defensively with the wrists as you will only injure yourself or your partner). Eventually, you will cross the circle to attack/defend. In the beginning, take turns so that one person always has the attacking role for a prearranged amount of time. Eventually, either person can attack at will.

Doing this means using what I call the Moving Through Step, which literally takes you through your partner's attack into and through the centre of the circle, to end up on the other side. In solo practice, some styles use this as their primary or alternative means of changing direction while walking the circle.

In Joining Arms practice (sometimes called *rou-shu*, or "soft hands," or Bagua Push Hands), this is the best, though riskiest, way of attacking the other person, as opposed to staying a safe distance away on the circumference.

Whatever footwork method you use, eventually you can also use kicks to attack and defend. In this regard, use care when striking the vulnerable parts of the legs to defend. Let the leg move with the impact if you are struck. Don't resist the impact, go with it. If there is one secret to doing this exercise, it is to keep moving and to attack when it is time to attack, and not get too close unless you are doing so. In other words—timing and distance appreciation.

CONCLUSION

As with all training, it is important to practise with a variety of partners: tall people can learn to use the reach of their long arms even more effectively; short people can learn to use a low centre of gravity to get inside a taller person's reach; heavy people can learn to use their mass even more effectively; slim people can learn to use their flexibility to even greater effect, etc.

Fortunately, few of us will ever have to use our martial skills for anything more demanding than friendly practice. In addition, *no* martial training can guarantee that you will be able to successfully defend yourself against any aggressor. However, such training should give you a fighting chance and, properly taught and practised, baguazhang is an insurance policy that also pays the dividends of physical and emotional good health.

Finally, I would like to quote from John Bracy's excellent book on bagua, as his advice is pertinent to this chapter and to the next: "The ultimate bagua, like any internal martial art, involves employing subtle pressures and leverages to subdue an opponent. It is far easier to to use obvious or brute force to beat an opponent, but it is is difficult to subdue him with subtlety. What is meant by subtlety? It is the art of using the slightest touch, redirecting and turning it back against the opponent who originated the force. Sometimes neutralising, sometimes leading aside, it involves matching the fine variations of pressures of the opponent with near-imperceptible neutralisation and redirection. However, subtlety can be mastered by only the most dedicated and persistent students of the art. It involves refined

skills of becoming sensitive, staying calm under pressure and direction the situation by the power of one's will. Thus the higher level requires study of the mind and the nervous system.… This is the superior man's way to know and ultimately defeat an opponent."

Chapter Five

Beyond the Martial Basics

Let's assume that you have become a somewhat seasoned practitioner, in which case you might be able to use your bagua skills in class against one of your peers or against an unskilled attacker on the street. However, being able to defend yourself against a skilful and aggressive opponent—whether or not he has a size advantage—is a different matter.

And, while you can certainly enjoy and benefit from your training on many levels without being able to defend yourself against such an opponent, it is also important to remember that bagua started out as an effective combative art—and not as qigong for health. In other words, we are likely to get the most from our training on all levels if we stay true to the roots of the discipline.

I don't want to sound pessimistic, but the longer I train the more I realise that it is very difficult to train safely and easily in a manner that can bring effective self-defence skills. Beware of teachers who say or imply that their bagua style has the secrets of combat that can be learned in a few easy lessons.

The secret to really learning to apply your bagua in a self-defence situation lies in incorporating some hard to find traditional training methods in your practice. Such secrets are to be found on your body as beads of sweat, in your heart as the courage and will to persevere in your efforts, and in your brain as you try to understand the theoretical underpinnings of bagua as a combative system.

Of course, another secret lies in finding a teacher these days who can really apply any or all of the traditional training methods in anything like a realistic combative manner. It also follows that, having found this role model, you train under his supervision until you can copy what he has taught and demonstrated easily, and then spend further years perfecting the various skills and attributes with a variety of partners and on your own.

All this can lead to an eventual understanding that comes as much from years of experience as it does from intellectual knowledge or solo form practice. We will call the final product maturity. And, if there are any simple steps to developing this potential to defend yourself in a bagua-like manner, they lie in mastering the following aspects of your training and

learning how they interact together. Baguazhang is very much the sum of its individual parts.

Advanced Martial Training

Returning to the subject of advanced martial training, it is not too much of a stretch to describe qigong as representing *wuji*, which gives birth to the basic martial practices of taiji, and that it, in turn, leads to the advanced concepts that make up the 10,000 things.

Hen and Ha Sounds

Superficially, HEN is the gentle, rather drawn out sound you make when inhaling through your nose to "activate" (I prefer that term to "inflate," which implies that you are too much like a rubber ball) the abdomen and tan-tien. For self-healing purposes, the resulting sound should be relatively quiet, slow and even—like the breath itself. In normal respiration, the diaphragm goes down and causes the lower abdomen to swell during inhalation.

For martial purposes, the HA sound escapes through your mouth and is sharp, sudden, and triggers an explosive expiration while the abdominal area expands suddenly. There are several reasons for using the HA sound. It loosens and focuses the abdominal area (muscles and connective tissue) to provide stability and aid in the absorption of blows to the torso. It can increase the power and speed of your strikes significantly, and the sound itself has shock value against your opponent—often even if he or she is half-expecting you to yell.

The use of breathing to increase your focus is nothing new—ask any weight lifter. Using a vocalisation to increase your striking power is nothing new either—ask professional tennis players. However, most modern martial artists no longer are exposed to such concepts or, if they are, do not take it seriously, so they only make a perfunctory use of sound to accompany techniques.

Real martial sound has to slightly lead the physical expression of the HA, not just accompany it. If you make the sound before or after the martial action, you have lost much of its ability to focus your muscles and weight in support of the martial action. Traditionally, the voice, like the eyes, acts as a mediator between your intention (*Yi*) and the *Qi*, to lead the hands to the target.

When first exposed to this aspect of training, I found it very difficult to get used to the concept of making noise as part of my martial methods. In general, women and men both tend to resist really letting go of their fear of being noisy in a group setting. The initial strangled squeaks and grunts tend to provoke laughter more than anything else in a training room.

However, with a little practice, eventually the letting go process will include being able to HA from the very centre of the tan-tien. The difference it makes to the speed and power of your movement can be quite spectacular. Like any other aspect of your training, you will only be able to understand the martial usage of this by practising under competent supervision.

While learning this skill, you should practise with some volume, but eventually the sounds can be as effective without being loud (or even audible) unless you choose to use volume

to provide an element of startle to your tactics. Make sure that the shouts are short and sharp, and come from the lower torso and the tan-tien rather than from the upper chest or throat. In the beginning don't do too many at one time, as your throat may get hoarse if you overdo the volume of the shouting and don't get it right.

Perhaps, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu was thinking partially of this kind of training when he wrote in his famous philosophical treatise *Tao Te-Ching* that a baby can scream all day without getting hoarse because it breathes naturally and, by implication, without tension. Anyone who has been around infants and toddlers will know the truth of this.…

Reverse Breathing

I've already touched on this in the previous topic. However, this type of breathing is essential to learning contact martial stills and so deserves further elaboration. In natural breathing, the traditional theory states that your internal energy goes up the back during the inhalation and down the front during the exhalation, while during a reverse breath it goes up the back on the exhalation and down the front on the inhalation.

Of course, this process also, even from a traditional point of view, has much to do with visualisation, and the actual physical difference in the way that the *Qi* circulates may well be purely in the mind. It is also true that some qigong teachers tell their students that women will naturally use reverse breathing all the time as it is natural to their gender or that breathing is not all that important.

As to reverse breathing, by using the mind, the physical sense of fullness in the tan-tien area can be transmitted down to the legs, hence contributing to firmer stances and more powerful use of the feet and legs. Thus, a well trained bagua practitioner feels as if the upper part of his or her body is fluid and relatively light, while his legs are heavy and firmly rooted to the floor without being rigid. By the way, being rooted does not mean that you are planted in the floor; a competent practitioner can maintain a sense of root while moving freely.

Let's be pragmatic and use the analogy of pushing a car: if you don't breathe properly while exerting physical effort (some teachers refer to this as having insufficient "pneumatic pressure" in the core muscles of the torso—particularly in the abdominal area, as well as where the psoas muscles connect with the lower back), this results in having insufficient muscle power to do the work at hand.

While using this idea when striking someone or being struck yourself, it is also essential to learn how to use this type of breath automatically, as it can save you from having the wind knocked out of you if you are hit with any power in some parts of the front of the torso. (N.B. It is only on TV and in the movies that the good guy doesn't get hit, or effortlessly shrugs off the effects of repeated blows.)

If you are exhaling and contracting the abdominal area while fighting, you are in for trouble if punched well. The goal is to have air in you at point of impact and your torso not in a contracting phase. Of course, this is complicated because your torso—except for the point of contact—must remain relatively relaxed to avoid causing your structure to topple or affect your balance, which can have serious consequences in a fight.

Jing

Reading any of the taiji, bagua, and hsing-i texts that have been translated into English in recent years will reveal a bewildering number of martial *jings* that apparently have to be understood by the internal arts practitioner. The word itself can be confusing, as the meaning can vary depending on how you pronounce it or the context in which it is used. This word can mean "sperm," or "the vital life force contained in hormones," or "a skilful physical application of the body and mind."

It is also essential to remember that in the older texts the author meant his words to be read only by his family members or senior students and perhaps by their eventual senior students. These texts were not designed to be instructions for beginners, and such a teacher would not have imagined—or desired—that his words would reach a modern Western audience.

Consequently, when the average modern student reviews these lengthy lists of *jings*, it is important to consider that these were notes for experienced students who already knew how to apply all or most of these skills in a martial context. Those readers also understood how the various *jings* interacted and supported each other from practical combative experience.

I think it makes better sense for the average modern practitioner to stop obsessing about learning dozens of separate *jings* and only distinguish a few key ones. In practice, it is impossible to do many of the described *jings* in isolation. Remember that an opponent who is charging you swinging wildly and powerfully, or launching a surprise attack, is not going to give you much time or space to react with any of these specific *jings!*

Martially, these interrelated skills must be so automatic that they are done by your body and mind in the correct sequence, and as the martial situation demands. You can not think or plan your way out of a real combative situation, you can only react. The few real internal martial experts I have met seem to focus more on teaching their students the basics and encouraging them to understand the martial truth behind "seizing the moment to gain the advantage."

The development of these essential energies requires competent hands-on instruction as well as good training partners with whom you practise in a controlled manner on a regular basis.

Ting Jing

Ting ("listening") *jing* is the most basic of the necessary skills and one of the most elusive martially. Younger, fitter students tend to substitute speed and power as soon as they feel threatened, while older, more intellectual ones tend to assume that being able to go through the motions of circling their hands and bodies in a connected manner with a partner is somehow enough to stop a real punch, rather than being just a basic choreography. In the long run, actual physical contact becomes less and less essential, but this is an elusive skill that comes, if at all, after many years of practice.

Remember that listening requires you to be able to survive the initial attack and successfully make contact with the opponent rather than being overwhelmed by that contact. What is

comparatively easy to do in a formal exercise in class is much harder to achieve when someone is actually moving in with a real attack.

Dong Jing

Dong ("understanding") *jing* is also easy enough to discuss and much harder to practise, as you need the ability to stick and listen with some clarity to begin to realise how hard it is to understand another person's balance and intention through physical contact.

One of the relevant sayings in the taiji classics is "I know my opponent, but he does not know me." This certainly applies to bagua as well. In other words, once two opponents touch, the "understanding" one has the skill and experience to listen and interpret whether a loss of balance or a physical technique is a mistake on the other person's part or a feint to lure them into compromising their tactical position.

Hua Jing

Hua ("neutralising") *jing* means being able to stick, listen, understand, and then deflect or neutralise a variety of attacks without using excessive tension or muscle in either your arms or your body while still staying within the correct fighting distance and being able to keep from being struck, thrown, or controlled while maintaining your own balance, space, and a calm mind.

I suppose, in Western martial arts terms this *jing* relates to the high-level applications of parrying and deflecting force rather than resisting or running away from it. By the way, pragmatically, resisting force is certainly better than running away—the reason we have such a variety of hard styles that can work effectively against an opponent with lesser or similar skills. On the other hand, running away from an incoming force does not work in close quarters—that is why the effective internal styles do not pull away from it. Instead, they avoid or deflect it at the last moment.

Fa-jing

Fa ("explosive" or "attacking") *jing* is difficult to learn, especially when you try to copy the skills and body mechanics of the few real experts who are still around. It is not just punching suddenly or with a lot of power and speed, although a *fa-jing* strike, when done by someone like Erle Montaigue, Alan Weiss, or Tim Cartmell, has to be seen or felt to be believed. Not surprisingly, it comes at the end of my list of essential *jings,* as being able "to *fa*" is useless without the ability to do the other *jings* I just listed. It also warrants more explanation than the previous three.

Those of you new to bagua may wonder what this mysterious skill actually looks like. One way to define it is to say that *fa-jing* is a sudden expression of whole body energy focussed through a part of the body into a precise target area. In bagua this is usually transmitted physically through the palm; however, a real expert can express it with their elbows and shoulders, hips and buttocks, through a head-butt, or with their legs. Again, it is important to remember that striking in this way is an application of energy rather than one specific technique although each style or teacher will usually have their preferences for how *fa-jing* is done and which martial tools are used.

Unfortunately, few experts, much less their students, can strike without "winding up" and still generate impact over the short distances that hand-to-hand combat occupies. In other words, real *fa-jing* feels short, sharp, powerful, and disorienting to the recipient. By contrast, the one who delivers it appears relaxed, balanced, and calm before, during, and after the delivery of that strike. Real *fa-jing* skills also involve the use of the mind, the eyes, and the breath (i.e., reverse breathing) in specific ways. The role of one's *Qi* is also vital, but that is beyond the scope of this handbook.

Another way to look at *fa-jing* is to compare it to an external-style strike which in most such styles is delivered with a lot of muscular tension, with the power coming from the shoulders or turning the hips while in a solid stance. The body is more rigid and segmented than in an internal strike. By contrast, *fa-jing* involves more relaxed power, a sinking of the weight, storing and releasing of energy, shifting of weight, turning and twisting the waist, as well as using the ground connection. The body appears loose and "alive" to the casual observer. See how easy it sounds!

In the end, learning to do this should be thought of as an aspect of your martial training and your solo practice. It shouldn't become an obsession. If you really want the "good oil," invest in one of Erle's videos that are devoted to developing this kind of striking ability to get the details that lay the foundation of personal skill. By the way, it is hard to believe until you start experiencing it yourself, but it is actually much harder to *control* the expression of your *fa-jing* than it is to develop the ability to generate it. However, doing so is essential if you are to train safely and effectively with your fellow students.

Even assuming you can develop this elusive power, note that many internal experts say such training is dangerous, and one can overdo it even knowing how to execute such strikes effortlessly. Some internal martial practitioners and teachers (Liang Shou Yu and Tim Cartmell are two I have heard say the same thing) suggest that too much *fa-jing* practice is bad for the health, and there is no need to routinely practise such tactics in solo forms as long as you do it in moderation while hitting a heavy bag or mitt that can absorb the impact.

Even Erle Montaigue, who is extremely talented at what is sometimes called *short power,* has said that your forms eventually should only have a hint of power when playing them. Of course, this supposes that one has learned how to do *fa-jing* properly in the first place.

I tell my students to focus on precision and timing, to learn the basic skills solo with only a moderate amount of speed, and then practise them full-pace on a striking mitt or heavy bag. Only when there is some skill in both contexts should they advance to practising techniques with each other. This is particularly important when two people of different weights and heights are practising together. Again, as I say to them, when you learn a martial art that might work combatively, there has to be the risk while training, but most injuries are actually caused by one student not paying attention to what they are doing or going too fast.

As in any aspect of efficient training, learning *fa-jing* is as simple as having a competent instructor for a role model who can actually do the strike, as opposed to telling you how marvelously his or her teacher did it. Having found such a role model, you have to develop the necessary physical skills (i.e., a healthy, supple body, proper body mechanics and conditioning, elasticity of the tendons and muscles). All this takes time, patience, and more than a little effort on your long road to making your skills look effortless to the casual observer.

Iron Shirt and "Taking a Punch"

Many hard styles teach to exhale while striking, and it is often taught in the internal arts in the context of reverse breathing; but others teach the opposite: you fill the form with inhalation as it opens and expands. Of course, with time and training, you don't think consciously about breathing, and the end result seems to be that the torso learns to breath like an accordion, or old style furnace bellows as it opens and closes, folds and unfolds, and that it can do what is needed automatically when struck.

As with many relevant advanced skills, it tends to be difficult to do one thing without having some skill at those other things that provide a foundation for each other. In this way, unless you have mastered natural and reverse breathing, it is difficult to do HEN/HA and *fa-jing*. If you haven't started to understand the latter method of breathing, then training in getting hit is either a painful failure, or you learn to take a strike simply by tensing the abdominal muscles.

Like so many other aspects of training, learning to be hit is a complex process which is difficult to master unless your instructor is capable of doing and transmitting the feel of it. Beware of teachers who have you train on each other and refuse to take a blow themselves. They may understand the theory but are using you as the laboratory rats without being honest about it!

To my mind, it is almost criminal to teach modern beginners with no martial experience that they can put all of their trust in "making a golden bell cover for the torso" out of *Weiqi,* or not having to learn how to defend themselves because they can learn to project *Qi* at an attacker. In some cases, the instructor actually begins to believe that they have some mystical ability because the techniques seem to work so well on their students or co-operative peers.

On a traditional martial level, those sifu who told the young Chinese patriot boxers at the turn of the last century during the Boxer Rebellion that their paper charms and esoteric qigong practices would stop the bullets of the foreign soldiers were probably not trying to mislead their followers. Most of them could have sincerely believed in what they were saying or had experienced the ability of the mind to minimise injury and stop the pain and bleeding from minor wounds. Faith in this case was the cause of death and injury.

However, with a little effort you can learn to stop a strike to the front of the torso—even if you cannot stop bullets! As I wrote earlier, taking a punch is not simply a question of tensing up to make a wall out of your muscles in the torso. This can stop some of the pain and impact of a good punch, but it will disturb your balance and leave you open to a follow-up technique.

Relaxing the torso completely also doesn't work. In fact, that is the least productive route martially. Even when wearing a chest protector, a good punch (whether internal or external) hurts like hell and destroys your balance if you try to be totally soft when it hits. The answer lies in not too much, not too little muscle, learning to breath and relax properly, and more than a little faith.

For beginners in this kind of training, receiving punches must become a conditioned response, in which the tissue being hit tenses momentarily on impact and then relaxes once

the power is removed. Learning to do this is difficult, but not impossible, and not just a question of hypnotising yourself so that you ignore the pain. By the way, traditionalists might say "you can learn Iron Shirt that can protect the face and head"; but having seen so many martial artists learn to break blocks of cement and slabs of wood with their forehead I wonder if that is true. In simple terms, getting used to being hit in the face is a matter of practice and correct alignment of the neck and chin, as well as keeping your mouth closed properly.

Competent Western boxers learn to do this the hard way as a by-product of their training. A fortunate few learn to do it internally by accident or because of some natural aptitude. These are the boxers whom you see in the ring who seem totally unaffected by the strongest blows to the body. Even a mediocre Western boxer who bruises and staggers as a result of body blows can absorb an amazing amount of physical punishment to the torso, and does so for a number of years.

There are lots of ex-boxers around, and you rarely hear of them dying or becoming invalids because of internal injuries to the torso. It is the blows to the head that are problematic and usually cause long-term disabilities and early deaths. The magnificent ex-boxer Mohammed Ali is a sad example of such brain damage in his later years.

Despite this, the easiest way to learn effective Iron Shirt in modern terms is to take up Western boxing on an amateur level, as the headgear will minimise the chances of long-term brain damage. Any good boxer learns to take pain and impact without getting internal injuries. It is also true that Western boxing, whether at an amateur or a professional level, is only suitable for those who are relatively young and fit.

A traditionalist would argue that it is also important to circulate and pack the *Qi* into the area being struck. Learning to do the latter involves learning and practising Iron Shirt Qigong, many styles of which have existed over the centuries. A few are still practised in some hard and soft styles. It is also only fair to say that many modern teachers have said that learning to take a punch will come naturally with proper form and qigong training. This may be true for those with much aptitude, but I doubt that the average student has much hope of learning to take a punch of any kind to the torso without training specifically to learn such skills.

On the other hand, I no longer think that it is essential to do specific Iron Shirt Qigong methods to safely do the following methods; but I don't regret the time I spent practising the traditional qigong sets that I did learn years ago.

However you approach being a "human heavy bag," as I said before, understanding how to do reverse abdominal breathing is essential. Similarly, doing regular standing qigong *is* essential both for good health and having a normal amount of *Weiqi,* which is the protective aspect of internal energy. Pragmatically, it is impossible to know if the *Weiqi* really does flow to the surface of the skin when you are struck, but if you can visualise this happening—it helps!

I have also had some success in teaching the concept by using a more modern analogy: imagine the push of the bare hand or the blow from a gloved fist activates a force shield a la Star Trek that only lasts for the moment the attacking hand is in contact with you, and that

this energy shield absorbs the attacker's force and uses it to charge your own shield generators. What is in excess of its requirements is automatically "blown back" or "rebounded" to the attacker. I suppose that you can think of such imagery as being a modern interpretation of the old saying *"Yi* leads the *Qi* which leads the *Li."*

As in all aspects of internal training, you need competent instruction, faith in the method you learn, the willingness and need to learn it, a good training partner you can trust, and perseverance. As to the technique—best learned from someone who can do it—every competent method, traditional or otherwise, that I have experienced involves getting used to the idea of being hit while maintaining your balance and relative relaxation. Oh, and you have to put up with some pain and bruising in the beginning.

Last, but not least, knowing how to take a punch is relatively useless for self-defence if you cannot carry the fight effectively to the opponent. While I teach a variety of exercises, including some that involve receiving and returning a medicine ball, as well as real punches to the torso with both a boxing gloved hand and a bare hand punch, this is well beyond learning from a written description.

The Old Masters were correct in repeating endlessly that there is no substitute for personal instruction. I will describe only one method that is relatively safe to experiment with, if you are doing so without personal instruction. This method is the result of my own research and experimentation although it is based on methods used by a variety of internal experts that I have met or studied with over the years. This basic method uses the open hand and relatively slow and gentle pushing only.

A pair of students stand with their feet shoulder width apart, one foot slightly in front of the other while facing each other. They should be close enough to each other so that their elbows remain comfortably bent even when the arms are extended. Their respective right or left shoulders should be facing each other.

One person (the "Sender") puts his open palm on the other person's lower torso and pushes slowly and firmly into the other person (the "Receiver"), who also has his or her hand on the Sender's lower torso. The Sender should have a balanced approach to how much force he or she uses: too much strength—and you will push the person over if you are bigger. If you are smaller, your shoulders and arms will soon get tired, especially if your partner resists skilfully.

The main rule is for the Sender to keep his or her balance, not use too much muscle, and not move their feet while pushing the Receiver into moving his or her feet. Use a timer to monitor short rounds and switch partner sides and partners frequently.

Remember to push smoothly and not to strike in any way (i.e., no sudden movements), and to practise on both sides. If your right hand is on your partner, then your right foot should be slightly forward, i.e., in a natural stance. Don't use a reverse stance, as it is easier to push by using the legs in either a crude or subtle manner.

Take turns being the "aggressor." The idea is for both people to move their arms and legs as little as possible while receiving the push and try to help the other person fall over if their push is stiffer than your returning. Oh, and there are many ways to cheat (e.g., leaning into your partner, overbending the knees, and springing up with those joints instead of using

the waist and spine when returning the push, resisting the push, and then using your arm to return the push with it) while doing this exercise, so it is important to be perceptive when practising.

Dealing with a downward push is the easiest for anyone with rooting and relaxing skills; dealing with a straight ahead energy is harder, and deflecting or returning an upward push is the hardest of all. If both partners have roughly the same level of skill and are roughly the same size, the exercise can easily turn into a stalemate when neither would seem to be doing much to a casual observer. When this happens, you need a different partner, or you need to move onto the advanced versions of this exercise.

You have to listen with your palm both when receiving a push and while trying to return it with the gentle inflation of the abdomen, the twisting of the spine and a minimum of physical movement or effort. At first, practise only with a partner who is roughly your height and weight, or who has a great deal of control. Eventually, height, weight, and arm reach become less of a deciding factor.

Reptile Brain and Animal Play

Again, this is another topic that really cannot be separated from the others in the sense that accessing this mind state is one of the "engines" that make self-defence workable from a combative point of view. Erle Montaigue calls the most primitive part of the brain stem "the reptile mind," to differentiate it from the more complex parts of the brain that grew out of it. This is the home of the primitive reflexes that served us so well for millions of years when our ancestors were simpler beings with only a few concerns to worry about—to put it simply, "Do I eat it, fear it, fight it, or mate with it?"

Martial sports-oriented arts can give you a fighting edge against someone who is interested in humiliating and dominating you, as in most fights between young men, but is not as useful against someone with a great deal of practical fighting experience and the real desire to harm you. Assuming that you also have effective martial skill, the so-called reptile mind can make your training more liable to succeed in a life and death situation.

Such training is much harder to control than to access in some ways. Some students find it difficult to do, but most who have any aptitude for the combative arts can learn to apply this mind set (it is not the same thing as just using rage as an emotional fuel for your tactics) and, I am sure, most of you have trained with students who were always needlessly "reptilian" when sparring or training martial techniques.

Perhaps, it is similar to the infamous junk yard dog—some animals are born mean, some are beaten and abused until they become mean, and some can turn it on and off as necessary. Oh, and it is rarely necessary in modern life. Speaking of dogs, Erle Montaigue said it well when he compared using reptile brain in martial training to being like the family pet. You trust Rover, he is lovable and won't hurt the kids or bite the postman, but if a member of the family is attacked, your 45 pound dog suddenly seems twice his size and will take on a much larger opponent without hesitation. Oh yes, and when the fight is over, Rover almost instantly goes back to being a pet—it doesn't remain in killer mode.

Nobody normal wants to live with a guard dog that is always ready to bite, and your training shouldn't turn you into the equivalent, or you may find yourself constantly in trouble with the law, or alone in your personal relationships.

Leaving aside the issue of reptile mind, we see the same idea expressed in the concept of using animals as models for your martial movement in most styles of hsing-i and bagua, not to mention many of the Chinese hard styles. In fact, one of the central concepts of the traditional Chinese martial disciplines is learning by observing and imitating animals.

This takes two basic approaches. The literalists try to imitate an animal as closely as possible. For example, a monkey stylist will make facial expressions, hooting sounds and flea-scratching movements while doing the forms and applications, imitating how that animal moves and fights. By contrast, the abstractionists try to copy the spirit of the movement of a particular animal, without trying to become the animal or imitate all of its mannerisms.

The internal approach can run the gamut of these two extremes. As far as I am concerned, the self-defence aspect of animal play means that either you choose the animal that suits your physique and concentrate on it for the training you mean to use in life and death situations, or the animal chooses you.

There are normally eight animals in the majority of bagua styles. In other internal and external systems there can be five, ten, or twelve animals. I favour the bear (or does the bear favour me?) and have related most easily to the movements of that animal, as I have experienced over the years in hsing-i and *liu he ba fa* as well.

I will describe him in some detail, as it will give you an idea of how the animals, both real and mythical, are portrayed. The bear is a symbol of strength, power, and healing wisdom. He is heavy and strong, and the practice of his methods stimulates and warms the kidneys and body in winter. In ancient time, the Chinese shamans wore bear masks or heads and imitated the stepping of the bear on its hind feet in ritual dances. This animal has several sides to his nature in the Chinese martial arts. Being well balanced and stable in his postures while slow and lumbering, he is capable of sudden bursts of speed. He is also playful and renowned for his bravery, and is traditionally used in some regions of China as a charm against thieves and burglars. Again, in parts of old China, the peasants believed that humans were descended from bears. (The Ainu in Japan still revere the bear as an ancestor.) I have to admit, I would rather be the descendant of a grizzly than an ape!

If it is true that Taoism is a shamanic religion, then the use of totem animals is not an alien concept to it, or to those aboriginal or European cultures which revered nature and sought to transcend the boundaries between the spiritual and earthly dimensions. Without getting too carried away by the links between Taoism and shamanism, I think becoming a bear or a wolf in certain circumstances is not outside the realm of possibility—it shows up too frequently, both in history and mythology (i.e., Viking berserkers and werewolves).

However, for all of our flaws, humans have something that animals do not have—compassion. If a zebra gets sick, the herd moves on leaving the ailing animal to the waiting lions—not from cruelty or self-interest but simply from obeying their own natures. Most humans wouldn't, and that is one of the important issues that separates us, for good and bad, from the natural world.

In any case, becoming like an animal is really only suitable in life and death situations, not for dealing with annoying bullies or with your training partners. I only want to acknowledge the possibility of becoming a bear if I have to fight a gang of bikers—rather than being one permanently, living alone except for mating season, and killing and eating my own cubs if I get the chance!

I tell my senior students that reptile mind, eagle vision, and "C" back are the flip side of the peace that comes through qigong. You have to be able to become (not imitate) an animal for life and death struggles, but you wouldn't want to be an animal for daily life. Compassion and the ability to choose how we act are what really separates us, for good and bad, from the Garden of Eden.

Erle's stuff is so effective, and more than a little scary, because he has mated natural movement and effective subconscious fighting skills to the reptile/berserker mind. As to how we trigger these attributes, a variety of hand postures, as well as different ways of holding the spine and the body, can bring about the requisite physiological response—but as to whether or not this is an example of auto-suggestion, or accessing some primeval survival mechanism, is up for discussion.…

I think there is a lot to be said for understanding your favourite animal(s) in whatever art you train in, as long as you don't confuse understanding the spirit and the movement with becoming that animal for training or fighting purposes. The latter might give you added ferocity or make your opponent think that you are crazy, but wouldn't be much help against a skilful opponent who was able to remain calm, or also uses this kind of mental state.

It is also important to remember that no kind of mental conditioning can guarantee that you will prevail against all opponents—even if you are well-conditioned and well-trained. Even though I am not a fan of hunting for sport, I do like the spirit of that old hunter's adage: "When hunting bears, some days you get the bear, some day the bear will get you!"

I'd like to finish with a cautionary note sounded long ago and in another context by the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (c.1844–1900). His words are certainly relevant to the subject of animal energies and self-defence.

"He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And, if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

Self-defence

Before discussing self-defence skills, it is important to have a working definition of internal martial force. On a mundane level, martial force is an expression of the laws of physics: strength exerted on an object or person, the ability to quickly and efficiently put mass into motion and focus its impact to your best advantage, and use leverage effectively. This also implies that the practitioner will be able to use whole body strength, as opposed to localised strength or crude tricks of leverage.

On a more esoteric level, internal force is also an application of *Qi* and of intention to maximise the effectiveness of your methods while minimising your physical efforts. Erle Montaigue has said, only partly tongue-in-cheek, that the internal arts are environmentally

"green" because the idea is not to expend your own energy but to recycle it as you counter an opponent's tactics.

Doing this means that you use rebound energy to power your continuing strikes rather than reloading after every strike as in a hard style counter—like an automatic firearm rather than a revolver. Being "green" also has the implication that you are putting in and withdrawing your own energy every time you make contact—and not expending your energy in a draining fashion. However, I am getting ahead of myself in discussing such issues.

As internal arts practitioners, and humans in general, are fond of categorising and find an almost magical significance in certain numbers, you may find it useful to divide the various basic expressions of martial force into five categories: No Force, Brute Force, Skilful Force, Upright and Integrated Force, Internal Force.

No Force

The average practitioner of No Force has chosen to define bagua training as a complete lack of muscular force and effort. The movements of such a person seem "mushy," without focus, and barely succeed in keeping him or her upright, much less martially capable. In this way *not using force* is interpreted as a *total absence of force of any kind*, as opposed to being a specific kind of applied energy based on efficient body mechanics.

By the way, natural body mechanics are found in many people who don't do the internal arts—any talented athlete in any sport have discovered or been trained to use the most efficient movement and posture to do the sport in which they excel. Similarly, many so-called primitive people also express internal body mechanics in they way they stand and move—the Masai of Africa and the natives of the Amazon forest express efficient posture and movement in a way that seems alien to out-of-shape Westerners.

Those who advocate this No Force training usually emphasise circular form or standing qigong as being the epitome of their art, and either don't practise any martial exercises, or limit their practice to overly rubbery and co-operative sensitivity training.

Instructors of such approaches are usually the ones who advocate to "do your form and it will bring self-defence skills automatically," or teach their students to "project *Qi* out of their palms at attackers." They are also often overweight, not in a particularly good condition, and actually seem to feel that this is somehow an indication they have "got it" martially. In the relative safety of a training environment, it is easy for both teacher and students alike to come to believe that a lack of force is somehow magical. You don't have to be very fit to learn how to fight—but being fit cannot hurt your efforts in that direction.

Brute Force

Brute Force depends on strength and some understanding of crude techniques or just experience at brawling. It is often laughed at by martial artists who confine their practice to the co-operative atmosphere of the martial classroom, but their contempt is unwarranted, as brawling regularly is one of the best ways to learn how to fight if that is all that interests you. Of course, it won't do anything for your character or your health.

Although Brute Force works very effectively against smaller or unskilled opponents and is often used by very large people or bullies, the ability to use it effectively fades with age, and is of less use against someone who uses the following three categories of martial force, no matter what their size and relative strength.

However, many a fit modern sport martial artist has had the knocked out of them by an older pot-bellied brawler who wasn't impressed by the talk of black belts and was used to getting hit because fighting was his idea of a recreational activity! If your opponent shrugs off the impact of your best technique as he rushes in and gets his hands around your neck, you'd better have a back-up plan (or a heavy stick) ready—or reevaluate how you train if you survive.

Skilful Force

Skilful Force is an evolutionary step up from Brute Force and combines factors of body mass, strength, and co-ordination with emotional maturity, martial experience, and superior technical skill. The training emphasis is usually on techniques and tactics, as opposed to intuitive application of principles. In addition, speed, strength, and flexibility of the arms and legs tend to be the key components to developing this ability.

Depending on the training, Skilful Force is effective in defence against those using similar tactics, or unskilled aggressors. In what I like to call "the pseudo-internal arts," it is usually used by those instructors who teach bagua, taiji, or qigong as a commercial sideline to their hard kung-fu or Japanese Style.

However, in all fairness, many external stylists develop admirable levels of Skilful Force and are strong and capable exponents of their respective arts. Such practitioners are often able to retain their skills into middle age although they usually must moderate or curtail their participation in sparring or competition in favour of teaching or form practice.

Upright and Integrated Force

This type of force is what I like to call "semi-internal," and its practitioners have taken their understanding of Skilful Force one step farther. They have learned or realised that an upright, balanced posture enables them to use centrifugal force in a very effective manner, particularly against straight line attacks.

As well as being upright, the practitioner of this kind of force has learned to mesh the turning of the body and the shifting of weight so that most of his or her mass is behind each technique. Their body mechanics tend to be much less stiff than the earlier categories, smoother and more rounded.

Most of the instructors I have met who teach the martial aspects of their respective internal arts never progress beyond this stage, as it becomes very effective against the techniques of those using the other forces previously described. At this level, it is also very difficult to find better role models.

In addition, human nature being what it is, those using this category of force are also less likely to be willing to give up their status as established experts to take their training a step

further, by bending the knee and publicly admitting that someone can actually be farther along the way than they are.

Internal Force

Internal Force is a difficult force to describe, much less acquire, and is rare even in the Orient. Many instructors say or imply that their practice has this quality, but fewer have actually advanced that far. The master practitioner who has developed such skill is able to blend his or her movements with an attacker's strikes and movements so well as to almost seem to disappear momentarily. In addition, he or she can counter-attack with such speed and precision that it is almost impossible for a bystander to perceive. Such a person spontaneously uses body mechanics so well that it seems effortless in comparison to the frenzied speed and muscle of the attacker.

Such practitioners are few and far between in real life. For example, of the many internal experts that I have met in the last decade, only a few are outstanding role models of what it means to internalise one's martial practice. I am sure that there are others out there, outside of my limited experience, but unfortunately the real experts of this calibre are rare.

There are key variables to look for when identifying an instructor or practitioner, who is developing real internal quality to their force.

- He is at least middle-aged and has a great deal of martial and life experience. Beware of 35 year-old Grand Masters, as they are sometimes described on web sites and in American martial arts magazines.
- He is shaped rather like a tree trunk in the sense of not being top-heavy in muscle development. Neither is he built like a weightlifter, nor is he seriously overweight.
- He feels rubbery or springy when you touch him. When moving, he seems boneless like a snake or a cat.
- He seems to stand as still as a mountain, explodes without warning, can change from one state to another with a spontaneity that is both breathtaking and frightening.
- He is usually equally expressive in both solo form and combat skills, and practises at least one of the healing aspects of the internal arts—acupressure, qigong, herbal therapy, massage, etc.

With the exception of No Force, each of the previous categories have some martial value. They often form a natural progression of development for the maturing internal arts practitioner. Many start up the ladder, but get stuck on a particular rung. Aside from having competent instruction at key points along this "ladder of life," the ingredients to a successful climb are patience, perseverance and the ability to admit that you don't know it all and never will, no matter how skilful you become.

As I said before, there is more to bagua and to life than learning how to fight, and there is nothing wrong with confining your study of the martial side of the art to the basic martial exercises. However, please don't assume that competence in these will somehow automatically bring self-defence skills or the ability to generate Internal Force. Done properly, such core exercises teach relaxation under pressure, as well as timing.

However, a strong committed attack of any kind will likely easily penetrate the skills of an average practitioner if he or she is overly defensive and yields passively to someone who doesn't obey the rules. Stiffness combined with lack of commitment is relatively easy to deal with if you can relax even marginally more than your opponent. However, stiffness combined with rage or skill is a different proposition, and one not usually encountered in a classroom setting.

In addition, very few instructors attempt to apply the principles of their art to semi-realistic fighting situations by having their students train, at least some of the time, against vigorous or spontaneous attacks by students who are not being overly cooperative in how they attack. In a fight success comes to those who blend offensive and defensive tactics, and don't just hope to stumble upon a suitable tactic by being totally on the defensive.

The first one or two effective techniques usually decide who is the victim and who is the victor; and, unlike the movies, where fights go on for what seems like hours, real violence tends to start and be over almost before you can analyse what is happening. Kicks are rarely used unless as an element of surprise or to finish someone who has been knocked down.

If you are not used to such events, both psychologically and in terms of being hit, the first contact may injure or shock you enough to leave you open to subsequent blows. Similarly, no one, regardless of their skill level, knows how he or she will react until they are faced with real danger the first time as opposed to sparring with an opponent in a friendly competition or with a fellow student in the safety of training environment.

As part of what the Chinese rather delightfully call "wild history," most students have read or been told stories about the old master who passively allows himself to be beaten by a gang of laughing ruffians. When they leave, he gets up as if nothing had happened, while over the following days the ruffians are all incapacitated by injuries caused by the beating they thought they were giving their victim.

Having had the experience of striking a modern-day expert or two with stiff force when I was a relative beginner, only to have it rebound painfully into my limbs or push me over, I will admit that there may well be something in such old tales. However, most of us are not capable of such marvellous demonstrations of passive resistance.

It is easy to get carried away with a feeling of spiritual or tactical superiority when doing an internal martial art like bagua, when you only ever practise in the safety of your school with people who don't have much relevant martial experience, or who are not trying to hurt you or make you look bad. Sadly, the good guys don't always win in real life, and moral superiority is small consolation for a beating that leaves you or a loved one emotionally or physically maimed.

If you want to maximise your self-defence potential, you have to practise accordingly. In combat, relaxation means not panicing if struck or suddenly forced to fight, being able to work in close contact with the attacker without being immediately grappled or thrown, which implies staying physically balanced and using effective tactics *immediately.* Remember the advice of a Confederate General from the American Civil War days when asked what his strategy was in battle: "Git thar first, with the most."

Going Beyond the Basics

In self-defence the biggest obstacle to making the jump from the basic martial skills is learning how to make contact with the incoming force from an attacker. This always brings us back to the issue (I know, I keep harping on this, but it is an important issue that often gets glossed over, in North America at least) that most bagua practitioners in China in the old days, when the art was still primarily about fighting, were experienced martial artists who already understood the mechanics of timing and distance and were used to the thump-and-bump of physical contact on a variety of levels when they first were exposed to bagua.

For students such as these, sensitivity drills were designed to teach just that, and were not designed to teach the fundamentals of fighting. Nowadays, of course, most students of bagua have little or no relevant martial experience to bring to their sensitivity training, so it is less useful unless they are taught the martial basics either beforehand or concurrently with the sensitivity training. Speaking of useful old expressions hinting that the internal arts were not originally a New Age practice, two venerable ones in the Chinese martial arts are my favourites: "Not to hit is to cheat the student." and "You must eat bitter to be full." Of course, any such saying is best viewed as a starting point for long-term study by those who are serious in the training and have considerable experience. They are of much less value for beginners and even intermediate level practitioners.

For example, most competent bagua styles have training methods developed to teach the skills of connecting, neutralising or yielding to force, as you simultaneously counter-attack. Such drills are designed to make training relatively safe and are not necessarily a precursor to free fighting. Most schools will have you sparring and free fighting first, and the push hands drills are taught later to bring the sensitivity of fighting skills up to higher levels.

Tim Cartmell, a modern teacher of the internal arts whom I greatly respect, wrote in 2003 on his website's discussion board: "The theory is, it is a waste of time to learn to neutralise incoming force, get an angle on an opponent and unbalance or 'uproot' him if you have no power or technique to close the deal with after."

Attempting to reduce the necessary factors to a manageable number, you could say that there are five essential self-defence skills.

Dominating the initial contact: When you touch the opponent with your arm or hand while deflecting and neutralising his attacking limb, you use that contact to control or "rub" the limb so as to distract him (even momentarily), as well as, hopefully, to upset his balance. This can also provide an opportunity to lock up one or more joints, strike with the other hand, throw him, or trip.

Stealing the timing: When the opponent doesn't want to take the initiative, you must either feint an attack or extend a hand inviting the opponent to make contact with you. Once this contact is made, you can use the bridge you have created to attack. This tactic can be particularly useful against those who have mistaken the forest for the trees in that their martial training has conditioned them to stick at all cost, even when this is counterproductive. Which leads us to the third point.…

Breaking contact, if necessary: If the opponent has skill and successfully adheres to your limb, you must break that contact by withdrawing the limb while counter-attacking, to distract him from pressing his advantage or from reestablishing effective martial contact.

Sticking until it is not necessary: If your opponent tries to break the bridge you have created, you must follow his actions to maintain contact with one hand and/or a part of your body while you continue to attack, until it is no longer necessary to do so.

Working the open vs closed sides of the opponent: One of the toughest problems in fighting someone with skill is that they will try to limit your options in the same way you will try to limit theirs. One important aspect of this is that the safest way to defend against their arms is to work the "closed side" (i.e., if he attacks with his right hand, you defend with your left and move to his outer side). This is often easier for the smaller, lighter person to do as a defensive action, but limits somewhat your targets for counter-attack, as the aggressor's torso is protected by his arm, as well as yours.

Conversely, working the "open side" implies that you defend against the aggressor's right hand with your left and stay in front of him. This makes it more difficult to avoid being attacked by his left hand but also implies that you have better targets available to your counterattack. In other words, his torso is relatively open. There are plenty of vulnerable areas to attack when inside, but the problem is that this works both ways. When fighting on the inside (and sometimes you have no choice) your opponent has just as much access and opportunity to attack your vulnerable areas, as you have to attack his.

If you are behind or outside your opponent's arms, the opposite does not hold true. You have an opportunity to attack his vulnerable areas; he has no access to yours. In addition, you have superior positional advantage to take the opponent down without much struggle, as well as the option to escape if need be. In order to end a real fight you need to dominate your opponent. If he or she is bigger, stronger, or skilled at fighting, it will often be very difficult to do so in a face-to-face exchange.

Maximising Your Self-defence Skills

It makes sense to assume that the opponent is dangerous (stronger and technically sound), and having superior positional advantage may be the only way we can win the encounter. However, if you spend enough time studying internal arts and have the opportunities to study with a variety of experts, it will soon become obvious that most of those teaching are not teaching self-defence skills that would have any hope of working outside of the relative safety of their classes.

By contrast, my main teachers both told me the same thing over the years, "The methods should give you basic self-defence skills in a few months or years, but refining those skills will take a lifetime of ongoing effort." Over the decades, I have found this to be true, and so have many of my students. Short-term skills can be rough, involve the risk of bruises (to the ego and elsewhere!) and a substantial amount of sweat—the beginning of the forging process, so to speak.

Long-term training (assuming competent instruction) polishes the experienced practitioner, so that he or she moves with the ease, efficiency and authority a beginner can only marvel at. This doesn't mean the beginner can not learn to apply the same methods for combat

purposes. This is one of the pleasures of bagua as a martial system which, as a by-product to self-defence skill, brings better health and even emotional/spiritual benefits. Most of us are fortunate enough (or mature enough) to never need to develop such skills. However, it is also a shame to learn skills you think might be useful, but would actually be counterproductive if you ever had to protect yourself or your loved ones from a serious attack.

What Do You Need to Bring to Such Training?

- Some physical strength and health are essential to safely train in any martial method that might work in a worst case scenario. Such training is not suitable for everyone, especially those with serious health problems, or unused to regular physical activity.
- Patience is a useful attribute, as internal style martial skills are not learned quickly, especially if you don't train in them every day for three to five years. I am reminded of the delightful story of the hsing-i master in China, who was supposedly lecturing his students on how important it was to study with a good heart, and that the training was ultimately to teach the students how to avoid fighting. One student, reportedly, impatiently asked, "If we are supposed to learn to avoid violence, why practise fighting at all?" The master's answer was, "If you don't want to learn properly, get out!" Most modern students don't want to learn so much as they want to feel they have all the answers.
- Willingness to invest in loss and learn from your mistakes, rather than get mad at yourself or your training partner.

What Should You Look for in Your Training?

- An understanding of balance and body mechanics that rely less on muscle mass and strength and more on leverage, timing, sensitivity and efficient body mechanics (i.e., whole body usage).
- For self-defence, it is essential to learn and practise a few methods that suit your body type and physical attributes so that they become reflexive, rather than practise many things in an indifferent manner.
- Experience at hitting actual targets with some power, as opposed to simply punching the air. It is easy to be smug with the speed of your strikes while doing a fast form or practising solo. It is a far different thing to learn how to hit without hurting your limbs, as well as how to absorb or transmit the impact without bouncing off what you hit!
- Some experience with close-quarters physical contact with your training partners. This is the hardest to cultivate in an internal manner (good teachers are few and far between), but even the crudest skill at taking a blow or being thrown will soon teach you many valuable lessons about what relaxation and balance are really all about in relation to self-defence. The lack of experience with any kind of body contact is the main reason why most modern martial artists would have a rough time trying to apply their skills against a real street fighter, or against someone really intent on hitting them, as opposed to playing. One instructor even assured me with a hint of a sneer that it was wrong to make any kind of contact with your partner while doing applications, as you would not be training your *Qi* properly! Sadly, his attitude is not

unique, even though common sense should tell you that you have to have control in your martial contact, but you also have to have contact! Conversely, this also explains why most modern experts with any real self-defence skills usually have a background in wrestling or throwing arts or have boxed (whether Western or Thai). They are used to close-quarter combat and to having to react properly while under real pressure.

What Should You Avoid in Your Training?

- An emphasis on sticking and yielding, as to make these essential skills easier to understand and practise safely in a large group, they are often taught counterproductively in self-defence sense.
- Complex methods that rely on the compliance of an overly stiff partner to have any success of application. I have met many supposed experts over the years who are teach methods that have no hope of working in the real world, even though they may seem to work in a classroom setting.
- Any teacher who claims that you can learn to project *Qi* as your main technique for self-defence skills. Common sense seems to go out the window if you judge by the number of schools whose teachers make their students fall over, twitch and throw themselves by a flick of master's fingers.
- Anyone who tells you that you can learn an effective martial art without any initial physical effort, a few bruises, and a lot of sweat along the way! In the long run, a competent internal art relies less and less on crude strength and technique, and it is possible to continue to train with benefit when one is past his or her physical prime. However, an internal art that has some claim to being a true combative art will never be as effortless as it looks to the casual observer.

Defending Against Knives and Clubs

A famous man (no, whoops, that was me) once wrote in an article for a British police magazine (Police Review, Vol.95, November 13, 1987) that the key to defending against a knife was to remember your mother's good advice when she caught you playing with the kitchen cutlery: "Don't play with that, you'll get cut!" In fact, the hardest aspect of defending against a knife is realising that you probably will get cut in some way, and you may have to give up a piece of yourself to get the knife wielder.

I don't often go into the specifics of defending against such weapons with my students because it is relatively useless to learn knife or club defences until you already have considerable physical skill in all the basics and have absorbed Erle Montaigue's excellent advice, or that of someone who really knows something about defending against such cutlery. It is also important to remember that you have to learn how to handle these weapons offensively with some ability to learn how to defend against them.

Incidentally, this holds true of unarmed techniques as well. You can't learn to defend properly if you have no idea of how to defend, and vice versa. You could call it another aspect of *Yin* and *Yang* being balanced!

To summarise Erle's approach to knife defence (and I do recommend his videos on the topic): evade (get out of the way), bump (strike the arm holding the knife in the joints, or where the nerve endings come close to the surface, away from you—to cause pain and, hopefully, knock the weapon loose from the attacker's grip), and attack vital points (eyes, throat).

The latter may seem harsh, but a cut to an artery can cause you to go into shock or bleed to death in a very short period of time. The point of a knife is often so small and sharp that only a relatively light amount of force is required for deep penetration that can lead to severe infection and death.

In unarmed self-defence you might be able to accept a blow from the fist to the gut in order to strike a more vital area, but this cannot work with a knife, as even a small cut to an artery can cause death in minutes from bleeding or shock. Similarly, an experienced knife fighter will expect you to block or grab the hand holding the weapon, and many are prepared to fold at the elbow, pull or twist the blade back to sever your fingers as you try to hold their attacking arm, etc.

More important, most techniques in unarmed martial arts require great skill to have any success of working, but the attacker's knife hand will often move in very small circles and erratically, as very little body force is necessary to inflict deep cuts with a sharp knife, and it takes little practice to be able to attack successfully with a knife—especially compared to how long it takes to learn how to defend against such attacks.

Without losing sight of the fact that any edged weapon can cause cuts to arteries that could kill you in minutes by causing shock or blood loss, it is essential to remember in all aspects of such training that the person holding the weapon—*not the weapon itself*—is your real concern. Quite often the sudden appearance of a weapon will prove distracting to the point where the attacker can kick or strike you with his free limbs and then use his weapon at his leisure.

Being clubbed is similar to being attacked with a knife, although it is marginally easier to defend against someone using a blunt impact weapon if you have any skill at all. A broken arm can be survived if it means you take out the attacker, but a cut throat to cripple your attacker is a very poor trade indeed! In addition, you may be able roll with the impact of a blunt weapon if it is hitting a muscular portion of your body in order to counter-attack, but it is still risky business.

As with any aspect of self-defence, you need to have excellent martial skills and practise against the common ways of swinging and wielding a knife or club to have any hope of being able to do so on the street.

Final Words on Self-defence

Since beginning to teach in 1985, and having also gotten married and stopped spending my free time in bars, I am happy to say that I have not had to fight anyone. However, I had some relevant experiences in my younger days, and in more recent years have manoeuvred my way out of a couple of situations that could easily have become ugly if I had panicked or overreacted. In addition, I have witnessed a number of street fights, and this kind of real

violence tends to spring out of nowhere. Unfortunately, you cannot always avoid violence by minding your own business.

There is a lot of truth to the statement: "A teacher who doesn't have experience in real world violence is next to worthless." Especially if that teacher claims to be teaching fighting or self-defence methods that are guaranteed to work under all conditions, and against any opponent. However, you can also argue that not having been in a serious fight since I started to achieve some skill shows that I have achieved some maturity and the ability to manoeuvre potentially bad situations into ones that were resolved without violence. Isn't one of the worthiest goals of martial arts training to transcend the need to come to blows?

Getting the most out of bagua as a martial system relies on many training methods to develop good basic combative skills—knowing how to close the distance between you and the other, being able to neutralise and yield as you counter-attack, and having some idea of how to deal with a variety of styles of attack: a puncher, a grabber, a thrower, or any combination thereof.

At the risk of being repetitive and pedantic, I will state that it is not possible to learn self-defence or combative skills that might work against a skilled or determined attacker without controlled contact and some form of spontaneous unrehearsed attacks, albeit in a controlled manner, with or without body armour.

Having this kind of training environment is difficult, as it requires one-on-one coaching or very small groups, and a willingness by both the attacker and the defender to escalate the "violence" only as much as each participant can manage at a given time in their development. In other words, there has to be a spirit of cooperation, even though this kind of training is not done cooperatively!

Finally, I would like to quote the words of Miyamoto Musashi, the famous mediaeval Japanese swordsman, who learned the hard way by surviving dozens of fights in which his opponents were often killed. His *Book of Five Rings* (from *The Martial Artist's Book of Five Rings,* as translated by Stephen F. Kaufman, Charles E. Tuttle Publishers, 1995) is a martial primer that is worth owning and rereading, as much of his advice is still relevant to the study of any effective combative art: "You cannot take a certain attitude and depend on it entirely. There are too many variations in attacks from the enemy. What you think is effective may in fact be ineffective because of the way in which the enemy is "feeling" at that particular moment. Your attitude must be such that you can shift into any other mode of combat without having to make a conscious decision. You must be flexible and have no particular liking for any particular set of techniques. …If you do not develop this attitude, what are you doing there in the first place? Combat fighting is not done for fun. Even in practice sessions you must have the attitude of going in for the kill."

Chapter Six

Controversial Issues

Many beginners come to a bagua class thinking that there is only one form of that discipline instead of two main approaches—*Wu-tang* and *Er-mei*—as well as countless variations, both good and bad, of each. In the same way, more experienced students may be surprised to learn that there is as much difference of opinion about almost *any* bagua-related issue as there are people talking about that subject!

One way to experience this is to visit any of internal arts internet discussion boards, although the level of sophistication in the discussions is usually on par with that generated in a redneck bar on Saturday night, or a schoolyard between adolescents.

In this chapter I would like to touch on some of the contentious topics that are frequently raised when experienced practitioners get together to argue in a friendly, or not so friendly, manner.

Thoughts on Lineage

As I said before, the history of modern bagua really begins with only one teacher, Tung Hai Ch'uan, and the few experienced martial artists who studied with him when he went public in Beijing at the turn of the 20th century. The inheritors of the styles developed by those students state or imply that their version is at least as good, if not better, than that of those who have learned and taught the modern wu-shu bagua forms invented by the Sports Committees of the various Chinese government-sponsored athletic colleges. I would imagine that the staff of these modern facilities also feel that what they teach is equal or superior to what is being taught by the traditionalists.

Then, of course, there are the countless kung-fu and karate "masters" who have learned a little bagua and are happy to teach it as a sideline, without worrying too much about the depth of their own understanding, much less what they are passing on to beginners. I have seen websites and advertising where earnest young men in aikido or karate outfits promise to teach you bagua as it was originally created, and offer bagua weapons forms using the *sai* and *shinai* to prove it! I have visited sites which promise you can learn the essence of the

art in seven days and another web page in which a young instructor wrote that the name of our art came from the war cry "BAGUA" the founder used to shout in battle. I wish I was making this all up.…

A cynic might think that the art has changed a great deal since its origins in the mid-19th century, and some of that change has been for the better (e.g., we understand the human physiology much better than before, in terms of how to train safely and get the most out of the human potential), and some for the worse (e.g., effective self-defense skills are replaced by highly gymnastic crowd-pleasing movements as a way of using the forms for competition).

You should never assume that a teacher is less competent on any level because you have never heard of them or their teachers, and vice versa. In the same way, a long and prestigious lineage cannot guarantee that a particular teacher will automatically be as great as those who preceded him or her. Similarly, just because an organisation is large and has a famous teacher as a figurehead will not guarantee competent instruction in any of the member schools.

Sadly, modern bagua organisations are sometimes shams in the sense that they exist only on paper, or the members have bought a certificate by sending in the required membership fee or visiting a famous master for a week or two in China. There are always otherwise reputable teachers in China who are not in the least bit shy in handing out certificates to any foreigner who comes with enough money and an introduction from someone they know overseas.

I don't think that there is any way around the necessity for change in even the best system of forms and training methods. To remain a viable art—and not just a museum piece—any style of bagua must evolve to remain relevant to modern students. Otherwise, it becomes a museum piece with relevance only to academics and those obsessed with the past.

I have been creative in small ways in my own teaching, as my skills have evolved in what I practise and teach; although, I have not consciously changed the forms that I learned from Erle Montague. In fact, too much change can also cause problems, and I do think that it is important to leave a legacy for future generations that has some continuity with the past. My only problem with creativity is when some teachers refuse to acknowledge that they have been creative, and attribute their curriculum to mysterious Chinese gentlemen who happened to live next door in Vanier, Ontario or in Twin Farts, Nebraska.

Leaving aside the tricky issue of deciphering lineage and deciding who has the real goods from a technical and historical perspective, a master may come from a traditional school, or modern one, or both. In this regard, a large part of the historical difference between traditional and modern bagua is the relationship between the student and the teacher.

In traditional schools the master was very selective of his students. He usually had only a few, and they were recommended by a close friend, family member, or other martial arts master. The prospective student had to undergo the *bashi* ceremony of swearing allegiance to his master. He then became an "inner door disciple" and was shown most of the training secrets. The best among the students was then selected to be the next lineage holder after the master passed away. He was shown all of the style's secret training techniques.

These disciples typically took care of all the master's needs and treated him like a father. All fellow students were treated like brothers. It was often not an exaggeration to think of them as being adopted members of an extended family. By contrast, in a modern or non-traditional setting, the teacher is willing to accept any student who walks in the door and is willing to pay the required monthly fee. There is no implied student-teacher loyalty in either direction, and the training is softened to meet the student's needs and to retain students.

Having trained in variations of both styles of school, I can't help but feel that one approach will appeal to those who crave authority and want to feel connected to something venerable, while the other to those who are more independent and value initiative and innovation. Both approaches have their merit in empirical values. Both approaches are also easy to overdo—the traditionalists become obsessed with historical accuracy over practicality, while the non-traditionalists can be too quick to throw out whatever doesn't appeal to them and change forms and methods for all the wrong reasons.

In addition, it can be difficult to find instructors who are better than you in ways that go beyond the stylistic differences meaningless at an internal level. Conversely, many practitioners and instructors take the attitude that unless they remain bound by whatever they have learned from their instructor, it has no legitimacy. It is easy to be too humble. And failing to learn from your own experiments and insights is as ridiculous as assuming that everything you invent is gold!

To return to the original topic, I would suspect that the history of bagua is full of myths and personal agendas. Finding the original method is highly unlikely; however, finding a good teacher with access to one of the better inheritances and variations of this discipline is both possible and crucial if you want to have some hope of developing even a pale reflection of the original art.

I just wish that innovative teachers would have the courage to come out and say, "Yes, I invented this, so what?" Honesty isn't everything, and it can sometimes be used as a weapon, but it is one of the few ethics that are essential for day-to-day integrity. "Being a man" has gone out of fashion, but I tell my two sons that you cannot have that elusive manna without maintaining honesty in your everyday life, both with yourself and with others. They look at me like I am an old relic (I guess I am in some ways) when I harp on the subject.…

It is important to remember that modern experts are often bringing aspects of their other fighting arts to whatever they teach, so that the information is rarely purely from a bagua perspective. And, this is certainly going with the experience and attitude of the founder of this discipline, whose genius lay in his reputed ability to get experienced martial experts from diverse styles to incorporate their strengths—but not their weaknesses—into the bagua he taught each of them.

In the end, martial lineage is important, but the ethics, individual abilities, and teaching skills of the person you plan to learn bagua from are even more important than how skilful his teacher was and who in the past had taught him.

Is Bagua a Healing Art or a Martial Art?

As with the previous discussion, there seem to be two major camps—those who believe that bagua is really a Taoist form of moving meditation, and it can heal just about anything if the practitioner has enough faith, and those who feel that it was developed as a martial art and should be trained with that in mind.

Certainly, the reputation of the early masters was not built on healing people, but on defeating them. And it sounds as if some of their personalities were rather harsh as well, if half of the stories are true. However, it is also important to remember that we shouldn't judge them from a modern "enlightened" perspective, as they were living in a very different age and society.

In any case, I have seen no evidence in almost fourteen years of practice and teaching to contradict my impression that the health aspect of bagua is anything but a relatively modern overlay on the art. After all, even the word *Qigong* only came into popular usage in China in the early 1960s. On the other hand, it is quite possible that those who followed Master Tung added traditional Chinese self-healing exercises and Taoist meditative knowledge, gained elsewhere, to what they had learned from Tung Hai Ch'uan in an effort to make the art more complete.

Realistically, I don't think we will ever know for sure. The older generation of teachers were too secretive, and very little was put down in writing until the 1930s, when Sun Lu Tang became the first to write authoritatively about bagua and the other internal arts, and when it was often of most use to those already "in the know" (martial short hand, so to speak).

In the long run, a good style of baguazhang will make you a better and healthier person. However, it bears repeating that it will not bring significant self-defence skills unless you learn and practise that side of the art with a competent teacher for several years. You cannot learn fighting by osmosis. Conversely, students who practise the healing part regularly may find that they learn the self-defence stuff more efficiently than those who approach the martial side of bagua without an inner peace of some kind and an understanding of the basic concepts of moving meditatively.

Because of the mystical nonsense that has been added to baguazhang from a variety of external sources, many students will assume that practising should make you a superhuman of some kind and guarantee you don't get colds or suffer injuries. Perhaps, because of the New Age veneer on many of the North American variations of bagua, there tends to be an expectation in both students and teachers that regular practice will somehow eliminate all physical ills and confer immunity to illness and general physical wear and tear. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For example, knee damage or chronic inflammation has ended or limited the careers of many internal arts practitioners. In particular, circle walking is often a killer on the knees if you don't get the walking just right, and sometimes even if you do. Two of my best taiji students started studying bagua with me, but had to stop because their knees were killing them after a few months. Once they stopped, things went back to normal. The Slip Step seems to be the hardest to do safely. I have other beginners drop out after a few weeks because they found that bagua in general was too hard on their backs and shoulders as well.

It is important to practise regularly and moderately, and not neglect getting warmed up and stretched (the two activities are not the same) before doing the more demanding forms. There is also a certain amount of wear and tear to be expected from training, so all we can hope is to avoid major injury.

There is a price for practising martial arts for years or decades—injuries. There are many days when everything aches in my middle-aged carcass, and I think to myself, "Why am I doing this?" I have arthritis in both elbows from being a training partner for too many students who didn't have the control that prevents needless damage, and my right hip is an osteoarthritic mess for a variety of reasons, including having tried to do high kicks for years and the stamping in some of the forms I have practised.

As you get older, it takes longer to recover from even minor injuries, and I now understand why instructors traditionally preferred to not train with the beginner and intermediate students. Sadly, those are exactly the students who need to feel the teacher's skill and power the most. As in many things, there are no easy answers.

The overall truth is probably that being relaxed and relatively calm can certainly improve your emotional life, and these can positively affect your general health—but common sense should tell you that you remain mortal no matter how skilful you are at any aspect of baguazhang. Practising martial arts can lead to a lot of unavoidable wear and tear.

WHAT LEADS: THE HANDS OR THE WAIST?

Some good bagua styles seem to advocate that the hands must lead the weight of the body, while our approach says that the hands lead, but the waist must move to initiate the hand work—in other words, it should be simultaneous.

To confuse the issue, some good teachers say, rather categorically, that the hands must pull the body into position, which would seem to contradict that the waist and weight changes must lead the hands.

I find in my own practice and teaching that the hands will often feel as if they are pulling the rest of me into the target, and this is most evident in expressions of horizontal power (i.e., twisting from side to side), and less useful if you are using vertical power (i.e., the spine whipping forward and back).

There are frequent references to the desirability of this in other internal arts I have seen or practised, and I have also read that in the oldest version of the Chen Style, the first form you learn uses the waist to lead the hands, and the second (which is faster and more vigorous) has the hands leading the body.

It makes sense to me to be able to use this skill as appropriate in a martial situation, rather than having to do only one or the other. It is like choosing whether to always make a fist or an open hand. If you can only do one, doesn't that limit you in many ways?

What is the Role of Pushing?

Bagua was invented at a time in Chinese history (late 19th century) in which your opponent, whether a soldier or a brigand, might be wearing leather or metal armour of some type. Punching or striking armour won't do as much good as using whole body skills to immobilise or throw an opponent protected in this way. Pushing with the hands becomes an essential aspect of grappling skills.

In fact, a good push can be a very useful martial tool if you do so with the whole body and not just with the arms or chest. It can be percussive and shake or jar the person being pushed in that manner, leaving them stunned and vulnerable to follow-up techniques. A good push can uproot and imbalance or topple an unstable opponent. A good push can send someone flying and twisting either upwards or downwards.

In training, pushing can be somewhat safer for the students than striking and grappling. It came about primarily to make some of the training methods a little safer for daily practice. Unfortunately, many modern teachers don't have enough of a martial base of any kind to be able to understand just how useful a push can be—and how limiting if that is all you can do.

Dim-mak

Tsien-hueh, as *dim-mak* is often called, refers to the martial use of the acupuncture points to cause temporary or permanent damage to the *Qi* flow and to the body. On a pragmatic level, the value of striking, twisting, or applying pressure to ("sealing") these points often lies in affecting arterial blood flow, dislocating bones, tearing muscles and ligaments, and traumatising major nerves.

It is a legitimate aspect of learning the traditional internal martial arts, but was customary taught only to those long-term students who were trusted the most. In the old days, if you were a *dim-mak* expert, and everyone knew about it, you were less likely to be attacked (except by another expert who would presumably have developed the skills necessary to counteract yours).

However, if you struck a non-expert, then they would expect to develop severe side effects, even if you hadn't done them any real physical harm—and probably would. For example, if you are convinced that I will make your left earlobe fall off three weeks after touching or hitting you on the right nipple, then it would be surprising if you didn't feel a little nervous when hit or three weeks after the fact.

Having said this, I also think that there may well be more to this than meets the eye, at least on rare occasion. My instructor on the subject, Erle Montague, often points out that it is useless to attend seminars on death-point striking, to memorise a number of acupuncture points, and to practise striking them on a willing partner. No one on the street would stand around and let you hit them the way you probably practise in a martial school setting. In other words, such theoretical knowledge is useless unless you can keep the attacker from harming you first—that is, you have to know how to fight.

Similarly, many of the points work so well because attacking them also affects joints, organs, or blood and nervous systems—you don't want to fool around with these areas in an irre-

sponsible manner. Striking the many points that are particularly vulnerable to knockout, or can cause death in a training setting, is a stupid thing to do if you are a student—and irresponsible if you are a teacher! While such martial skills may have been necessary when created in lawless times, they have little place in modern life except as a curiosity.

Self-defence skills are an essential aspect of the traditional Chinese internal arts—but there is more to those arts than martial skill. However, in regards to *dim-mak*, life is too short to waste it developing knowledge that is the unarmed equivalent of nuclear weapons. If you train to automatically attack lethal points—which are often over internal organs that are rarely easy to rupture, causing peritonitis, or in the throat, or near the eyes—it would be astounding if you didn't reflexively overreact when frightened, if well trained at the methods but not in self-control.

Also, wishful thinking aside, hitting someone in a classroom setting is not the same as hitting them if they are attacking or defending with skill and aggression. Watch any Ultimate Fighting Match or mixed martial arts sporting match, and you will see fighters strike and be struck on supposedly vulnerable point after point without even looking crabby about it!

So, boys and girls, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and the use of *Qi* cultivation in the internal arts—no matter how you define and explore such knowledge—should promote good health, not destroy it. *Dim-mak* is a fascinating and legitimate aspect of the traditional internal arts, but you should think of it as being one aspect of your higher martial education—not the be-all and end-all of your training.

By the way, unlike many of those who have produced videos and books in the English language on point striking and *dim-mak* concepts, Erle Montague has gone out of his way to help debunk the myths and demonstrate how important it is to not practise such tactics in a haphazard manner.

"EMPTY" FORCE

There is grudging admittance that *dim-mak* was, and is, a traditional aspect of the internal arts, and it is still possible to find modern teachers who know something about that aspect, even though they are rarely willing to teach it. Conversely, after all of these years of training, meeting, or observing a variety of Chinese martial arts experts, I have not seen any real evidence that k*ong-jing* ("empty" force) or the ability to project *Qi* from a distance to affect an aggressor are anything other than an empty farce in martial terms.

Of course, having said that, many people continue to believe in it, and a number of internet "masters" seem to be charging and earning large amounts of money from those who buy their books and videos and attend workshops on this subject. It is also true that projecting *Qi* in various ways is considered legitimate in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and it is possible that some talented qigong doctors can emit *Qi* from their hands for healing; but their hands have to be very close to the acupuncture points they are trying to affect. And, martially, an expert using his *Qi* defensively must still be able to do everything else to keep an attacker from making contact with and hurting him before *Qi* can be applied.

I think the idea of being able to defend yourself at a distance is very seductive to the types of student that are often attracted to bagua and to the internal arts in general … until they

find out that hard work, sweat, and the odd bruise are the main secrets to learning how to defend yourself. Most of these leave the legitimate instructors, to go in search of those teachers who specialise in mystery, neo-taoism, and what a cynic might call stage magic.

Misplaced faith is bad enough when limited to solo practice, it is even worse when the instructor claims to teach martial techniques which only work on a student who is subconsciously co-operating with their teacher. For example, if I tell my students that I will be able to attract them towards me with the *Qi* in my hand, by hovering that hand close to their chest, it will work with a significant proportion of them. If I then explain that it is not really *Qi* but just their subconscious co-operation (i.e., autosuggestion) to moving my hand towards and away from them, it will still work on a significant proportion of the students—even though their intellectual mind knows that it is a trick.

To make it even more confusing and interesting, it is also true that a traditionalist would not argue with such a modern interpretation of *Qi*. For him, this would only be an example of how one person's stronger *Qi* can influence or defeat the weaker *Qi* of another person.

I also think that many of the martial arts "hype masters" do actually start to believe their own stories after having repeated them often enough to audiences that swallow the stories or have never seen better. It is easy to be a big fish in a small pond if the people we teach have never seen the ocean and sharks. And a lie repeated often enough begins to sound like the truth!

"Light Body" Skills

Many stories circulate about the rather fantastic abilities of internal experts of old, and one of the most common is running up walls and jumping onto rooftops. Anyone who has seen a kung-fu movie has seen this concept taken to excess. Tung Hai Ch'uan was reputed to have this kind of skill, and there are many stories about his ability to leap about like a gazelle, move silently and swiftly as if he had teleported himself from one spot to another, etc.

However, having just seen a television documentary about a group of French extreme sports fanatics in Paris whose idea of a good time is running along fences and rooftops at top speed, I have to rethink my complete cynicism.

The documentary showed some of their training. These young men, most of whom were experienced break dancers or extreme skate boarders who had decided that it was more challenging to do it at a run and without the use of wheels, were practising extreme "plyometrics"—as in hopping one-legged up all the bleachers at a soccer stadium as a warm-up for their runs through Paris. In fact, they called their sport free-running which about sums up the madness of running over cars to cross streets and along narrow railings high above street level.

At one point in the documentary, one of them jumped up from a stationary start and landed safely balanced on top of a high chain link fence. Another ran up the wall of a narrow alley in two bounds after a running start, twisted himself around in mid-air, took a step on the opposite wall then twisted back, and ended his mad climb on a roof. As I was finishing the edit for this book I started seeing a new car commercial, in which a couple of

these free-runners are shown hurtling along beside the Scion car being advertised, and it is rather amazing to watch them in action.

So, if this kind of physical prowess is possible today, then maybe the Chinese historical reports of lightness skill may not be as fanciful as we might otherwise think. The human body is capable of extremes, at least in rare individuals.

SEXUALITY

There is much weirdness in sexual matters in all cultures and I have met or heard of more than one bagua teacher (sometimes Chinese, more often not) who wraps his classes in pseudo-taoism as a way to get young sexual partners. To be fair, though, there is certainly a legitimate aspect to the theories behind Taoist sexual activity from a traditional viewpoint, but—caveat emptor (translation: "let the horny beware!")—I also think that the old Chinese approach to preventing or limiting male ejaculation to preserve vital fluids and energies may often have had something to do with elderly rich men trying to satisfy the needs of a household with several wives, concubines, and attractive female maids!

Anatomically, using any method to stop ejaculation is more likely to simply cause retrograde emission, in which the sperm is released, but forced backwards into the bladder instead of being ejected immediately in the normal manner. So, someone who actually tries to use one of the recommended Taoist practices for preventing ejaculation is liable to only end up *thinking* he hasn't ejaculated, as he is still "losing *Qi*" when he urinates after having engaged in retrograde emission.

Abstinence as a way of purifying the monk or the warrior is an age-old tradition in both Eastern and Western cultures. The Knights Templar, the Knights of St. John are examples of mediaeval attempts to unite the two concepts. This agenda also often gets carried to ridiculous extremes by those with a sexual/emotional axe to grind. In fact, many famous, and not so famous, masters have been fond of female company, and have continued to demonstrate that interest into old age. The spirit and *Qi* are still vital although the body grows old.

It is also relevant to point out that many of the best Chinese masters I have met were skirt chasers, heavy drinkers, heavy smokers, ate whatever food was put in front of them—in other words, ordinary human beings, warts and all. Too many Western students of the Chinese internal arts are looking for the archetypal master, as I noted in an earlier chapter, from having watched too many episodes of the old kung-fu television series as children.

Oh, and by the way, there are many stories about Tung Hai Ch'uan having been a eunuch, and while I don't want to prick anyone's sensibilities on the subject of eunuchs, the history of this kind of mutilation is quite fascinating. Many cultures, both Western (Italian *castrati* opera singers as recently as the 20th century) and Oriental (eunuchs of harem fame), have used castration in different forms for different cultural ends.

Suffice it to say that there were different forms of castration used to produce different kinds of eunuchs. One method involved removing the penis surgically (a straw was inserted into the stump during the surgical process to keep the urethra from closing during the healing process). If the person survived the surgery, his hormones and physical appearance would

remain intact. The other methods involved crushing the testicles or removing them surgically, and this would affect hormonal production and physique.

All methods had a high death rate, and it should tell you something about human nature and desperation that made parents take their sons to have the procedure done, so they could get the employment that required castration. And there were still adult volunteers, as being fixed was the only way to ensure attaining some positions in Chinese government service.

I have no idea what, if anything, was done to Tung Hai Ch'uan and, if half the stories are true about his martial abilities, even if it was possible, I wouldn't want to stick my hand down in his pants to investigate the state of his genitalia.

It is also always a good idea to introduce common sense when faced with extreme views on human sexuality, especially when taken out of the social and historical context in which they first arose.

Cross-training

As the years and the decades roll by, your priorities and interests will change. What was important at the age 25 in terms of your internal arts (e.g., developing physical skill, learning self-defence skills, or becoming a better fighter) will be less important at the age 40 or 50. Assuming that you have shown some aptitude and have practised regularly, this is partly a reflection of the fact that you will have improved your health and also achieved real self-defence skills.

I think it is also fair to say that studying any competent internal art with diligence can increase the pace at which one grows up. However, time and experience also play an essential part in whether or not you are still reacting like a child to all of life's tribulations by the time you are middle-aged. There is real magic in competent instruction and diligent practice over the long term, but it is hardly a miracle cure for all of our physical and emotional problems. Coming to terms with this is also part and parcel of the maturing process as a practitioner. We all want miracles—even those who seem the most cynical want to feel as if they are tapping into something special. It is very hard to come to terms with the issue of skill and wisdom coming only through long-term effort. In particular, the martial skills can only be purchased through a credit card issued by the Bank of Blood, Sweat, and Tears.

By middle age, your skills should have reached the point that the arts are no longer a major focus, an obsession, but simply an important aspect of your daily life. You have come to terms with both your skills and limitations as a practitioner, and learned to value your daily training for its own sake, and not just as a vehicle for self-improvement or good health. One of the best pieces of advice I have ever had from Erle is "Do your internal art to live well; don't live to do your internal art!"

In the good old days, a martial arts professional in China would train regularly with a competent teacher, as well as practising on his or her own for many years, and rarely, if ever, get the opportunity to study anything other than his system. Of course, those who earned a living as body or convoy guards might garner the hard way considerable experience with other fighting styles and incorporate aspects of what they survived into their own prac-

tice. However, it was not acceptable, except under rare circumstances, to train with several teachers.

In modern times, some martial artists have spent much time and effort studying a variety of systems, either in-depth or superficially, for many purposes. Unfortunately, the latter category of teacher or practitioner usually doesn't spend enough time at any of the secondary arts to really understand how they are different from what has already been learned.

Particularly, for starting to develop skills that would be useful against a real attack by someone who has some experience and skill at real fighting, it is essential to study arts that have some form of body contact, albeit in controlled manner. For example, it has been my experience that those modern internal arts teachers who actually have some real combat skills have either done *judo* or Western wrestling, *shuai-jiao* or Chinese wrestling, or learned Western boxing skills.

It is not that these arts are superior to the traditional arts, it is just that the serious student will learn how to take body contact and physical abuse (falling, being hit with some power, being thrown, the feel of being grappled at close quarters) with the minimum of tension. You have to learn to relax as much as necessary to avoid injury. The same is also true of those taiji schools where the students have learned to absorb impact by allowing themselves to be hurled into walls, sometimes padded with old mattresses, sometimes not.

Perhaps, part of the problem with the reputation of cross-training lies in the very glut of "young masters" who study one or two years each of a variety of hard styles and then, as they move into middle age, add a slow taiji form, or wu-shu style bagua form, or qigong to their bloated curriculums! It is quite depressing to surf the net and see website after website promoting these new styles to the general martial public. While I am sure that some of these innovators are doing their best and may even have something to offer to beginners, I am equally sure that even more are only fooling themselves and their own students with their abilities, or are creating a new style to make money or boost their egos.

There are not too many modern Sun Lu Tangs or Chen Pan Lings, but we should not assume that people with martial genius don't exist anymore. Cross-training when you have a solid foundation in one art can really help the learning process in the other Chinese internal and external arts. Sadly, most modern practitioners don't have a solid foundation before they go off studying other approaches, and lack the aptitude to absorb not only the similarities, but the differences between the arts they are learning.

From my limited experience, usually the students who are most keen to cross-train prematurely tend to focus on how the new art(s) are similar to what they already know, as opposed to trying to analyse how the new system or teacher does things differently. And, as sometimes the differences are subtle, it can be problematic to sort the wheat from the chaff.

In any case, I think it is important for the serious martial student to learn the basics of both stand-up fighting and ground fighting in the early stages of training, covering the foundations of both. With a coherent system, there is no reason to completely focus on any one range of fighting to the exclusion of the others. After students are proficient with basic stand up and ground fighting techniques, I recommend spending proportionately more time on stand-up fighting skills if your concern is more self-defence rather than sport. In

particular, this means having learned how to do break falls and rolls that might actually work on surfaces other than mats or tatami.

If you look carefully at *any* combat art or sport (the ones which actually involve some form of non-cooperative contact fighting), you will find that most of the participants are young. How long can one realistically hope to apply ground fighting techniques? It will depend on the person. If you go to judo tournaments, you will see older competitors—although they usually don't compete with younger fighters, but in the seniors categories. On the other hand, how many competitive boxers do you see past age 30? Not many!

Understanding a principle and knowing how to fight are not the same.The greatest bagua, hsing-i, or taiji master alive will fare no better on the ground than a complete beginner if they haven't actually practised ground fighting. If understanding a principle translated into actual ability, why practise at all?

In the last fifteen years, I have learned and/or discarded many forms and methods from taiji, bagua, hsing-i, and *liu he ba fa*. It has been an oftentimes lonely and frustrating journey for various reasons. The late Jou Tsung Hwa said that you have to be your own teacher, and he was very right in some ways, but very wrong in that the average beginner has no hope of developing real skill of any kind unless he or she has competent instruction from role models who are good at both teaching and doing whatever is being taught. Erle has also said more than once, "If I have reached any heights in my skill, it is only from standing on the shoulders of giants!" This is a sentiment that I now understand.

The longer I teach and train, the truer it seems that real understanding can only come from having as wide as possible an experience of competent forms of martial art and then practising more and more of less and less. This, of course, seems like a paradox, and it is—the internal arts are full of them.

True experiential learning of any mind/body discipline is first a process of accumulation, and then a process of de-cluttering and simplification. I suppose, a few geniuses can skip stage one and arrive at the final stage, but I have met very few in almost 30 years of doing martial arts. It seems to me that it eventually becomes essential for a serious student of any good approach to the internal arts to find a "retirement package"—as the desire to experience and do everything is as counterproductive in the long run as being too narrow in your focus and only following one approach to being internal.

One aspect of the Chinese martial arts that has always made me a little grumpy is the tendency for instructors to imply, or come out and say that they are masters of many styles. It is not uncommon to meet a teacher, Chinese or otherwise, whose business card or flyers list him or her as a master of wing-chun, shaolin, both Chen and Yang taiji, hsing-i and bagua, as well as qigong of different types. I have met a few over the years who actually are good at a variety of arts—but these are few and far between. The average "generalist" of this kind is only fooling himself and his students by teaching one or two main styles and a smattering of forms or methods from the other arts.

It bears emphasising that you cannot understand a style
by learning one or two of its forms.

I was discussing this issue with a colleague the other day, and we agreed that only the best and the worst students attended a lot of workshops and did serious cross-training. Hopefully, he and I both fall in the first category! Here is the problem in a nutshell—if you study one art deeply, you will learn a great deal, but you also limit your potential for growth by not studying how other systems do the same thing slightly (or greatly) differently. Conversely, if you dabble in workshops and instructors, spending a year in one system and six months in another, you can gain a superficial veneer or knowledge but will never actually learn anything in depth.

If you are young and fit, I would recommend boxing as a great martial sport to explore. As self-defence skills go, I would put my money on an experienced Western boxer (even an older, out-of-shape exponent) who has to fight any type of modern martial artist, black belt or not. Boxing has had its ups and downs over the decades, but the sweet science is just as profound in its principles and techniques as any of the other martial arts when it is well-taught and well-practised. It has the advantage of simplicity, and its only disadvantages are the stamina and conditioning required, making it a young man's art.

Years ago I was friends with a 50 year-old man who was learning taijiquan "for fun." He had been an amateur and professional boxer and still trained and coached young boxers. It was both sadly funny and instructional to see him flatten the younger and fitter taiji instructors who sparred with him at the school where we trained. Anyone who says an experienced boxer is automatically inferior to a traditional martial artist has never had the experience of being hit by one.

Finally, here is another internal arts conundrum about the difference in the three main internal arts. I is phrased in the context of my university degree in ancient and mediaeval history:"*Hsing-i* is the impenetrable stability and shock of a square of heavy infantry with spears; *Bagua* is the swift fury and unpredictable tactics of light cavalry; and *Taiji* is a walled fortress from which the defenders make sudden sallies. Martial geniuses can mobilise and use effectively all of these, while the average expert understands one strategy to a greater or lesser degree."

Chapter Seven

Weapons Forms & Function

In the old days, the need to become skilful at defending against, and using, a variety of edged and blunt impact weapons was a necessity for those with bagua skills while employed as bodyguards or as professional escorts for groups travelling between the cities. For this purpose bagua uses the common weapons of that era, two short—the sword and broadsword, and two long—the staff and spear. It also specialised in a variety of smaller edged weapons of various shapes; the most famous of which were the Deer Horn Knives.

Bagua also became famous for its use of very large weapons. Various styles utilised extra heavy and long straight swords, broadswords, and spears. Incidentally, I am not sure that oversized weapons are ever of any real value in combat outside of their original purpose under certain battlefield conditions. For example, long spears were designed to be used *en masse* to hold off groups of cavalry or masses of similarly armed men. They are of less use at close range, and oversized chopping weapons are of limited use when fighting in close quarters or in an urban setting.

In fact, the oversized bagua "knives" (*dao,* as broadswords are called in Chinese) were originally meant to cut the legs out from under a horse, so you could more easily get at the opponent riding the animal. They were not for duels between men on foot, as the skilful man with a shorter weapon, or a pair of shorter weapons, has a real advantage against the fellow with the big cumbersome weapon, if he can get within the range of that longer weapon.

There are certain training benefits (relearning the balance of a top-heavy weapon, developing stronger muscles) to practising with an oversized weapon of any kind. However, this is not my cup of tea. It is hard to be impressed by the modern versions of these forms demonstrated with light and overly flexible replicas of the original weapons. When you can see the blade bending floppily as the wielder does his form, it is less impressive in terms of the potential martial value of the performance.

The movements associated with each bagua weapon help to develop the body in ways that are not often easily accomplished through empty-hand forms and exercises. Having a weapon in one or both hands changes the ways in which you can move and necessitates

a heightened sense of awareness of your body and the space through which both you and the weapon(s) move.

You have to learn not only to control your body and its six directions, but also extend that to the weapon(s) moving forward and back, up and down, and side to side. This is hard enough to achieve when practising by yourself, but these new skills become even more crucial when you are trying to be attentive of someone else who is trying to use a weapon against you.

So, in the old days, you had to not only know how to use at least one weapon in a practised and efficient manner, but you also had to have some idea of how each of the other types of weapons you were liable to have to fight against would operate in the hands of a skilled opponent. No easy answers once you add weaponry to the equation of developing advanced bagua martial skills.

Traditional Weapons Training

As in all Chinese martial systems, weapon training is an essential aspect of traditional bagua. There are a host of weapons used in solo and partner training: sword, double sword, single-handed and two-handed broadsword, spear, staff, axe, and knife, as well as a variety of weird and wonderful specialty weapons, like the famous semicircular swords and the "judge's pens." The later are metal rods with a swivelling ring that fits over your middle finger to allow you to grip and twirl these handleless ice picks.

It is best to practise applications only with wooden weapons at first. Not just for safety but also to minimise the strain in your wrists and arms. Practice with metal weapons can be reserved to solo form practice. It also doesn't hurt to wear safety glasses, helmets, protective gear on your hands, forearms and elbows, as these are prime targets for many techniques. You can also improvise more complete protective outfits from hockey, Lacrosse, and BMX bicycling gear and look like an extra in a cheap rip-off of the classic *Road Warrior* epic as a bonus.

Any solo form designed to teach the use of an edged weapon is best done with a good quality metal weapon, although it is best not to sharpen the blade—even if the quality of the blade allows for that—until you are sure you are doing everything properly and safely. Getting a well-balanced combat steel sword or broadsword, much less Deer Horn Knives, will be very difficult and expensive.

I have not had much luck buying metal weapons by mail order. You rarely get what you think you are buying quality-wise from the Chinese mass-produced wu-shu weapons factories. In addition, you need to spend some time holding and using a weapon to see if the balance and weight is suitable to your needs and level of expertise. Real quality replica weapons are worth the expense for the serious practitioners although you should be prepared to pay hundreds of dollars to get quality—assuming you can find such in North America. By the way, the wooden and cheap metal weapons available today tend to splinter or break fairly easily, and it can get expensive replacing broken equipment.

One of the greatest benefits of training with any weapon is learning how the shape and structure of each weapon affects, determines, and limits its martial function. While all

weapons share similarities within their broad categories—long or short, edged or impact, each has special attributes and limitations that you must get accustomed to. It is also true that all weapons are the same in the sense that they can only be properly used by a skilful practitioner whose skills have become such that he or she could literally pick up any item and use it as an improvised weapon in an emergency.

One of the hardest skills to learn is how to hold each weapon with just the right amount of power and muscular force. Even some relatively skilful practitioners will discover that they are not as relaxed or as strong as they thought when trying to master the correct grip with the required flexibility of wrist and elbow. It is also true that much of the difficulty in learning to hold a weapon properly comes from developing the proper grip using only the thumb and one or two fingers.

There are different theories as to which fingers should be used, and the best way to discover what works best for you is to experiment with a variety of grips. The complexity is in having a grip flexible enough to allow you to manipulate the weapon easily while still retaining the strength to absorb an impact without losing your grip on the weapon. It is not easy to learn this, and you won't if you never train with a partner and actually practise a variety of applications with him or her.

These forms need lots of space for practice—an important consideration, as with any of the more traditional forms. There is literally no point in learning the weapon if you cannot practise it for lack of indoor training space—remember winter! Practising in a park is an option, but this is not China, and pedestrians are not used to the sight of flailing swords the way they are in Shanghai or Beijing. If you are planning to practise in the park or your backyard, you will need a fair bit of privacy. More than one of my students have had the police arrive to question them when someone phoned in a complaint that "some crazy guy is waving a sword in the park."

If I may speak to my own students for a moment. I believe that it is important to develop a minimal understanding of the solo form and martial usage for at least one of the following weapons, and to have some comprehension of the main characteristics of usage for the others, especially if you plan to teach bagua at some point.

The Broadsword

Throughout bagua's relatively short history, the broadsword was the weapon of choice of many practitioners, especially those who worked as bodyguards and caravan escorts. This weapon has always been a mainstay of all styles of Chinese *Wu-shu* (literally "war arts"). It is very efficient against a variety of other weapons, especially when used in conjunction with internal body mechanics. It is relatively easy to achive competency with broadsword. This is why it was the primary weapon of common soldiers in ancient Chinese armies.

Although the solo form and applications that you will be learning don't come from Erle Montaigue, they are based on traditional sets that have been modified according to my understanding of broadsword use. I make no pretensions that I can provide expert weapon training, but from what I have seen of modern bagua—what I teach is pretty good func-

tionally. However, if you are planning a career as a caravan guard, I suggest you start searching for a more competent weapon's master than me!

The broadsword is primarily used at medium and short range against a variety of weapons. Bagua fighters were renowned for their skill at applying close quarter fighting tactics. A slicing weapon, its comparative weight and the somewhat top-heavy design of the blade makes it an excellent weapon only for someone with the size and strength to wield it—a lumberjack's axe with a three foot razor edge, so to speak.

The study of any competent traditional internal style, bagua included, is a process of learning how to efficiently employ the factors of distance and angle, and generate short power in a specific manner. Using the broadsword is no different. The motions are often short and quick, and the practitioner usually keeps the blade in front of the body to protect himself.

Because the broadsword is a single-edged weapon, the palm, forearm, or even the body of the wielder can be pressed against the dull side at times to assist in blocking or deflecting actions and to express whole body power at close range, especially if the opponent is attempting to use the same tactics. Many different aspects of your bare hand training will become clearer as you seek to apply the principles of bagua to this weapon. I am quite fond of this form, as it is not overly complicated, doesn't take too much space to perform (compared to the other traditional weapon forms), and its characteristics suit my build. Like hsing-i, the movements of the broadsword are best suited to a heavier or taller practitioner although anyone—no matter what their relative size—can benefit.

If you are studying bagua elsewhere and can only learn this weapon, try to find an instructor who actually knows what they are doing. Even a marginal understanding of combative function will help make your solo form work challenging, rewarding, and fun.

Training Tips:

- One of the hardest things to get used to in the solo form is the use of the wrist and the elbow to help generate the circles created by coordinating footwork with the use of the waist.
- In training applications, it is essential to remember that one of the key concepts is disarming your opponent, and I don't just mean knocking the weapon out of his hand although that is a legitimate application whenever possible. Once you have parried, deflected, or, as a last resort, blocked the attacker's weapon, you must immediately try to cut the hand or arm controlling it before trying to finish off the attacker with a cut to the head, torso, or vital points.
- When bracing the weapon, remember to use the palm—not the fingers—and to keep your finger tips where they belong *on your fingers.* Do not allow them to protrude where an opportunistic attacker might be tempted to slice them off with a sudden change of direction of his weapon's edge.
- When connecting to the attacker's weapon, remember that the guard is a useful tool for knocking the attacker's weapon out of range for a quick counter-attack of your own. To be able to do this, you have to be sensitive, applying the right amount of pressure to the opponent's blade with yours and be aware of the other fellow's hilt if

you are at close range. Getting smashed in the face by the butt end of the handle of his sword or broadsword would be very distracting!

- Practising competently should teach you about extending your reach and force to the tip and the edge of the weapon; and, as it usually has only one sharp edge, it is a little safer to do so when you first start exploring weapons.
- The bold, twisting, wide-swinging tactics of this weapon should have elegance and smoothness, as well as martial effectiveness in the use of angles around the body. Doing a well-structured broadsword form properly is like being inside a steel cage or at the centre of a hurricane. Every stroke should cut cleanly along one of the eight cardinal directions in the triangles that fill your circle. Have you figured out this bagua conundrum yet—finding triangles in circles and the circles in triangles?
- If you don't keep your balance when advancing, you are liable to fall over from your misguided momentum if your stroke falls on emptiness (i.e., your target had the skill to move at the last moment). You must learn to use the weight of the sabre, not depend on it to power your stroke. The strikes are best thought of as chopping slices. This is one way to learn to really relax the shoulder, elbow, and wrist; but it is often a rather hard way of learning to do so.

The Long Staff

The bagua solo staff form that Erle used to teach is a very difficult one to practise due to the extraordinary number of techniques, the physical complexity of some of the moves (e.g., doing a somersault over the staff), and the amount of floor space that it takes to practise, as it is done in straight lines. When I have asked him in recent years, he told me that very few WTBA members were still practising, much less teaching this form. I have seen one or two forms demonstrated in North America that seem to be shortened versions of the same set.

Although the solo form and applications I teach to my more experienced bagua students don't come from Erle Montaigue, they are based on traditional bagua staff sets that have been modified according to my understanding of this weapon. As with the broadsword, I make no pretensions that I can provide expert weapon training; however, what I teach is not too bad in martial function.

This solo set is done in a circular pattern and has a limited number of techniques, so it is more suitable for use as an introduction to this weapon. The bagua staff can vary in length although the shortest (for indoor practice) should be determined by placing one end of the staff on the floor and measuring to the height of your eyebrows. For outside usage, it should be proportional to your height, and longer is not necessarily better. It should not be too much longer than eight feet, and 3/4 to an inch in diameter.

The whip-like force generated in many of the sweeping strikes is expressed through the forward end of the staff in blocking, sticking and striking. Many of the techniques for this long weapon are adaptable to those used with a spear. Some styles of bagua also use, or used, a somewhat shorter staff that had a spearhead at each end. Training methods include striking various objects, including your partner's staff, to learn how to generate power from relatively short distances without having the reverberations rebound into your own hands.

The staff moves through diagonal planes around the practitioner to strike and to intimidate. Thrusting attacks using the tip of the staff move fiercely along a single line, and the forward wrist is used to direct the weapon, as well as to move the forward end of the staff to parry, stick, and circle in defence and attack. Movements to the left and right, or up and down are controlled by the rear hand.

Striking force is generated near the end of each posture, and is a wave-like momentum developed by the practitioner's lower back, spine, and waist. The wrist and shoulder may add to this force, or be used to change the direction subtly if the stroke is used as a defence and followed by a thrusting action. Even without a metal spearhead, the shock of being struck by the end of a hardwood or waxwood staff is nothing that can be ignored.

Training Tips:

- The staff is usually held with at least half of the shaft ahead of the lead hand, although there are postures that use the stick with the hands positioned so that you have three equal lengths with your two hands as the dividing points.
- There are swinging movements in which both hands are held quite close together at one end of the staff and, while this can increase your reach suddenly to confound an opponent, it also means that your weapon will take longer to retrieve to a more secure grip.
- Some of the thrusting actions are done with a screwing action forward and back, and this is an essential aspect of traditional staff and spear work. Twisting it forward increases penetration. Twisting in the opposite direction, as you retract a thrust, assists in snatching back your weapon if the opponent is able to grab the shaft. If you were doing this with a spear, the sharp metal of the edges of the spearhead would sever or injure the hand(s) trying to grapple or immobilise your weapon.
- Assuming that your weapon is long enough and made from good quality wood, you should find that there is a shaking quality to the business end of a thrust or swing, and that this was considered a good sign among practitioners.
- Unlike the edged weapons, the staff is often taken over the head, as such defensive moves are frequent and can vary from blocking an overhand strike down to your head to setting up a throw if your weapon is grabbed with two hands by an unwary opponent.

DOUBLE SWORD FORM

This form was the first of Erle's bagua weapon forms that I learned back in the early nineties, and I gather that not many members of the WTBA practise it anymore—which is a shame. It is a lovely, if demanding set. As you use a short straight sword in each hand, the changes of the circular solo set must be done on both sides of the body. This makes for a very long sequence indeed.

Functionally, using two edged weapons is much harder than it looks. There is a tendency not to pay enough attention to one sword while wielding the other. A few cuts and scrapes

from a metal sword from carelessness while practising on your own can soon set you straight in solo practise, but it takes longer to learn about in applications.

When gripping each sword, one must learn to do so gently but firmly with two fingers and the thumb, not all five fingers as this lessens the ability to twirl the swords with the wrists. Done properly, these twirling actions are not for the show, but serve specific martial purposes, such as diverting an intercepted attack downwards and then twirling the blades to effect a counter-cut immediately after.

The internal energy may be manifested in the sword as a quivering of the blade during *fa-jing* movements, or as a sharp penetrating movement generated by the spine and legs. The *jian,* whether long or relatively short, as in this case (each blade should be 26–30 inches in length, depending on your relative height), is a double-edged blade that literally cuts both ways, and is as effective on the backstroke as on the advance. The footwork is nimble and lively, and half of the use of a straight sword of any length is learning to sidestep and evade attacks as much as parry or block them. The last tactic is reserved for emergencies and done with the thicker bottom third of the blade.

The *jian* is often compared to a Chinese dragon: fast, graceful, and frightening. Where you would block with the broadsword, you dodge with the straight sword; where you would slam, you slice; where you would charge, you circle or sidestep. However, unlike the sabre, the sword is never allowed to cut above the crown of the head for a variety of reasons. For example, you wouldn't want to sever your connection with the *Yang* energy of Heaven, would you? Of course, a pragmatic dullard might also think that doing this makes it less likely that you will accidentally scalp yourself while swinging the bloody thing.

On the other hand, let me add that competent internal swordsmen will use some movements that make it superficially look as if the sword has gone over the head. However, if you examine the posture carefully you will see that the wielder has actually swung his arm and the hilt and blunt part of the lower blade over his head and not the edged part of the blade. To the casual observer there is not much apparent difference, but the wielder is less likely to cut or hit himself with the sword in this way.

To be effective, you must connect your blade, not the edge, to the opponent's and then use the weight and movement of your body to simultaneously deflect his blade and affect his balance. This should create an immediate opportunity to slice the wrist or arm that holds the sword to literally "disarm" him or her prior to a finishing stroke, if such is necessary. While it is sometimes okay to trade blows with an unarmed opponent if you have a better target, it is never so with edged weapons. You must evade, parry, or block every attack, and your opponent likewise.

This sword form looks best when done by someone agile and tall with long arms. It can be practised with benefit by *anyone,* and is particularly suited to women and smaller men, as it relies on speed and precision rather than weight. However, using the sword (or two in this case) is not easy, especially if one strives to develop real skill, as opposed to doing a form. It is very demanding of a supple wrist that is really connected to the waist and feet.

As to weight and stiffness of the blade—I am afraid that heavier is better when attempting to replicate realistic combat skills, as opposed to the light weapons used in wu-shu perfor-

mance skills-oriented forms. The people who enter competitions have weapons with blades bending like tinfoil. The lighter the weapon, the faster they can move, and they don't have to worry about striking armour or another better quality sword.…

I have also read and been told by more than one instructor that the intensive study of the sword is an excellent way to both health and enlightenment in the long run. I went through a long period of time in which I had little interest in weapons training of any kind; but now I derive a great deal of satisfaction from the forms I practise.

Certainly, the sword has been imbued with a spiritual quality in many societies—both Western and Oriental. I am sure Sigmund Freud would have something to say about the significance of swords to men, but then again he seems to have been more than a little obsessed with the penis himself!

Training Tips:

- Although it appears otherwise, you must never move both swords at exactly the same time in any of the postures, as one blade will be defending, parrying, blocking, or sticking the attacker's weapon while the other cuts the attacker.
- When thrusting, it is customary to keep the blade flat when attacking the upper part of the body, so that the blade can slip between the ribs and not get stopped by bone, only inflicting a superficial wound.
- When defending, the knee joints are also useful targets, as the attacker would have trouble hurting you if he cannot walk properly or stand on two feet anymore.
- Blocking is normally done with both weapons against a heavier or longer weapon, and you will try to use the last half of the blades of your weapons to do so, as that would be the thickest, strongest parts of real swords.

Deer Horn Knives

These weapons, also called Crescent Swords or Mandarin Duck Knives, are always used in pairs.They are short-range martial tools especially designed to disarm the opponent and be effective against a variety of types of long and short traditional weapons. One of the fight scenes in the recent kung-fu epic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* shows a fight scene between one of the villains and a bounty hunter who uses a pair of these weapons.

Deer Horn Knives come in a variety of sizes. The ones used in Erle's form are of the rarer *Bei-jing* variation with one of the forward prongs twice as long as the other. They can be used for thrusting as well as locking and cutting. At the basic level, you block or check the attackers's weapon with one of yours while counter-attacking with the other.

Using this weapon properly also requires that ideally you attack the opponent's hand which is holding the weapon, rather than just making contact blade on blade. Of course, this requires that your appreciation of timing and distance must be much better than your opponent's.

The knives are difficult for an opponent to wrestle from your grip, as there are four points and seven edges in seemingly every direction near the handle. This means also that they can

cut the wielder as well as the opponent. In one motion, the back hook may block a weapon while the front hook strikes, followed by a ripping cut from one of the edges. As the knife is withdrawn, the other hooks on it may slash through the area of first contact.

I have had the chance over the years to see and handle two pairs of these weapons. One set was a reproduction of an antique pair, handmade by a metalworker who collected antique Chinese weapons. The other pair were supposed to be antiques from the turn of the century. Neither pair were identical in design to each other or to the ones we have and use in my classes. Both pairs seemed well-balanced and potentially lethal.

Neither of them had sharpened edges on the two short prongs that protect the wielder's hand, and neither of those prongs had sharp tips, which makes sense from the premise of protecting the hands holding the weapons. Erle Montaigue states that the originals used for the form he teaches had points and edges everywhere, but told me that one can use the ones without the sharp edges for safety reasons. However, once one becomes proficient, it is a final test of your ability to do the form properly using the knives with all sharpened edges.

Erle's solo form is an excellent example of how a weapon form can be demanding and simple all at the same time. I recommend it highly to those who have some skill and interest in developing a bagua weapon.

Training Tips:

- It is very difficult to use these weapons at first if you don't have very strong and flexible wrists and elbows, and many of the postures demand a great deal of precision to avoid hitting yourself in the hands and the head while practising. I have given myself some nasty cuts with the blunt metal weapons that I practise with, as have the three students who are learning this set from me.
- The applications are often quite simple if you have the requisite bagua body mechanics. One of the keys to effective application is to remember that you will often try to stick and check the attacker's weapon with one of yours while trying to slide up his weapon to cut his hand and trying to get a vital target with the other knife.
- These weapons are very good for taking off heads, and I am told that this was the tactic of preference in the old days—block or evade, and use one or both blades (in a scissoring action) to cut off the head, or, at the very least, slice through the neck. The other characteristic use of this weapon is to trap a blade between the two front prongs, and by twisting your knife suddenly wrench the weapon out of the other person's grip or, if that fails, immobilise the weapon for the moment that it takes you to counter-attack with your other knife.

Conclusion

While these solo and application sets have little functional role in self-defence in the modern age of guns and biological weapons, they remain important tools for refining your understanding of bagua, and they can also be a lot of fun to practise. You remember having fun, don't you?

Particularly for more advanced practitioners who have become a little complacent about their skill levels, learning to use these weapons can be a way of exploring subtle aspects of the training, and of discovering how little you really know about the big picture of the traditional martial arts.

Oh, and remember my mother's advice from the section in Chapter Five on defending against knives.…

Chapter Eight

Teaching and Ethics

The instructors I have met over the years whom I respect the most have said that their art has to keep growing and changing to remain anything beyond a museum piece. Sadly, the flip side of this issue is that most teachers don't have the skills, experience, or personal genius to bring anything new and valuable to any aspect of the traditional curriculums without ruining what came before.

Similarly, a teacher should be an expert in what he or she is teaching, both theoretically and practically, before he or she begins to do so. Conversely, it is equally true that teaching can make a good practitioner and teacher even better with time. Of course, this also implies that the students you teach a decade or two down the road will get better instruction than those you taught at the beginning of your career.

But, if it is of any consolation to those who realise that they were the early students of a particular teacher, I am sure that even though Stradivari was producing superior violins at the end of his career, the ones he first made were probably still pretty damn good. Everyone has to start somewhere on every journey.

It is also true that those who learn in traditional clubs with large group classes will be learning mostly from senior students, rather than having the attention of the chief instructor. This is not an easy way to learn as the quality of teaching will vary from senior student to senior student, but the variety in itself can be stimulating to the inquiring student with a drive to understand which of these lesser role models is on track for any particular topic.

In theory, a good teacher will assign coaching roles only to those apprentice instructors with the requisite skills and will be present at most of the classes if needed. Consequently, in some more traditional bagua environments you will be expected to teach as part of the long-term learning process, and your interest in teaching is of less relevance than the wishes of the chief instructor.

However, in a more modern bagua environment you may have to decide if you want to teach. If you don't want to be a coach for those junior to you in the student body, you should be able to say "No, thanks!" without repercussions.

SHOULD YOU TEACH?

So, let's assume that you have put in your time as a beginner and intermediate level student, and after 3–5 years you have some experience helping your instructor to coach the newer students, and you find that you have some interest or aptitude for teaching on your own—with or without your teacher's formal blessing.

It is always courteous to ask your teacher if you have his or her permission to start classes on your own, though courtesy seems to be a dying art and politically incorrect these days. Failing to do so with a more traditionally-minded teacher can have repercussions. (Being ignored from then on as part of his or her "martial arts family" is the mildest and most common.) It also makes sense to be part of a larger organisation to be seen as legitimate by potential students although the bagua/Chinese internal arts world is full of fascinating loners as well.

As a teaching novice, there are lots of things to consider: teaching yet another group of beginners who don't look as if they can lift the TV remote control, much less balance briefly on one leg; trying to find the time and energy to practise for yourself, either during class or after, having spent much time teaching basics to others; maintaining your enthusiasm when only one or two students bother to make an appearance at a group class.

Whoops! Those were some of the many reasons *not* to teach. Seriously though, teaching can teach the teacher many valuable lessons about his or her own understanding of the art. It is one thing is to be able to do a form or training method, quite another—to explain and demonstrate your performance in such a way that you help someone else along the same path you have followed. In the old days, you wouldn't have dared to teach without the permission of a respected, long-term instructor. For many reasons today, this is rarely the case.

Unless you are fortunate enough to be under the supervision of a competent instructor in a group of some size and quality, there is also the issue of often having to create your own training partners to be able to practise the two-person methods and forms.

Deciding that you are ready and want to start teaching is one thing, adjusting to being the role model instead of a student is another.

WHAT AND HOW YOU TEACH

The longer I teach, the more I realise that teaching and reteaching the basics is essential for most students, even though most students (especially the ones with aptitude) will get bored with these fundamentals before realising how important they are. It is also tempting to simplify the material to make it more accessible to a larger number of students, but, in general, this should be resisted, as it does nothing for the art and, in the long run, cheats the students of the potential of this great discipline. However, it is essential to realise that in teaching the principles and methods to your students, *less is more*—the larger the curriculum (especially for beginners), the less time there is for them to develop skills at any one thing in one or two hours a week of class time, not to mention the few fitful moments of practice that most of them will do on their own.

In the good old days students often studied with their teacher *every* day before going to work or in the evening after work; nowadays most students—even the better ones—will feel herculean in their dedication if they come to class three times a week for about an hour.

It is not easy to predict how quickly a particular student will make progress. Some students can come to class obsessively and still make little progress while others make the most of one or two hours of class time per week. Progress is always an individual matter.

It is important to structure your classes, as most beginners want to feel that they are being supervised and led, not left to practise on their own. I have often been told that there is a great deal of structure to my classes compared to other kung-fu classes that the beginner may have done elsewhere, and those making the comments are usually pleased with this difference.

In this light, whether you are a novice or experienced instructor, remember that the people in your classes are supposed to be there to take your advice if only for the hour or so you teach them. Unfortunately, there is a common hidden agenda with Western students who expect that paying you will entitle them to have a say in the way they are taught! This applies particularly to private students who are able to afford the extra cost and are probably used to manipulating those around with their greater buying power.

Don't bend over backwards to be accommodating to them, or to humour their idle chit-chat, or the tendency to stand around when not being supervised as it often happens in group classes. As long as it is done with courtesy and common sense, the majority of adult students respond best to structure and gentle discipline. In fact, structure is not a dirty word unless you become too rigid in how you run your classes—aside from the basics, which need a lot of attention, a little variety in how the classes are run from month to month can be a good thing.

It is important to "show off" to the students once in a while to remind them that you still have some "value added" and to provide the visual stimulus some students on the edge of a big breakthrough will need to suddenly "get it." As with any peak performance, some who have those breakthroughs will hang onto the experience and use it to transform their performance from then on. With others, the breakthrough will fade almost immediately, providing only proof that it is possible for them to *fa-jing* or do a leaping kick. (You never know when you will be attacked by someone on horseback!)

Few in any group of beginners will bother to practise what little they learn—let alone make the effort necessary to advance to the deeper aspects of the art—outside of the formal class times. It is not easy to decide whether or not a student should learn in stages or "thrown into the water." It is true that the occasional exceptional student will be best served by being taught in detail right from the beginning. However, it is equally true that the majority of students have to learn to crawl before they walk—much less run!

Of course, this also means that the teacher must remember the basic ways of doing the various forms and not just move on to whatever level he or she is ready for and forget the material that is no longer relevant to their level of expertise. In some ways, life is simpler for those who don't teach, as they can move from one level of form practice to another without

having to remember or practise the difference between the form they do now, after five or ten years, and the form they were taught as a beginners.

Sometimes, watching your students flounder is a powerful reminder that you may not have "got it" quite as much as you think. It is also true that some talented practitioners are useless as instructors through lack of teaching or verbal skills, and some who are less talented as practitioners are very good at coaching others to excellence. In particular, the language issue helps to explain why the level of bagua practice in the first few decades of it being introduced to non-Chinese in North America and Europe was relatively low. The teachers spoke poor or indifferent English and were unable to easily explain the subtleties of the art to those who were not Chinese.

In terms of physical teaching style, it is important to get to know your students before you start "laying on hands" to reposition them manually when trying to teach abdominal breathing or how to use their bodies properly. Many people are uncomfortable with *any* touching; conversely, some will enjoy it a little too much.

There are always groupies in any teaching relationship, and it is important to discourage such emotional dependence, which can leave the client open to emotional or physical abuse (i.e., I don't think it is *ever* appropriate to date or be intimate with your students). You even have to think twice about socialising with them too much, in case they misinterpret or try to use the relationship to their advantage.

I use a lot of humour while teaching, and it is usually well-received, although I have been criticised for it on occasion—some beginners want and expect their instructor to be solemn. You can't please every potential student, and I no longer try!

It is essential, in the long run, to develop your own style of teaching. Any good approach should be transmittable to at least a few people, and not be the sole property of the instructor who may be relying on his personal genius and experience to make dubious material work. In fact, one way of judging the quality of the teacher is observing their bagua group training—if none of the long-term students have any real skill despite the teacher having desirable qualities, you can assume that something is wrong with the curriculum.

Some of the old-time relationship between teacher and student was feudal and abusive. There should be no need to be a Master to get the respect of the students that you want to keep; on the other hand, it is also easy to allow those you teach to treat you too casually. Don't forget that they need you more than you need them. Oh, and don't get discouraged or take it personally if you have almost no one left after the first few weeks you start a class. There is very little demand for quality internal arts of any kind.

On the positive side, teaching what you know is one of the best ways of improving your understanding of the material and deepening it—so it is worth the effort and frustration for a few years at the very least. The real reward comes from those times when you watch a group of your students and notice magic in their movements, or see smiles and hear laughter even though they are working hard.

Where you Teach

Traditionally, parks were used as training grounds, but weather is often a factor that can severely limit outside training time in many parts of the world for month after dreary month. I don't practise outside in hot and humid, freezing, wet, or snowy weather—so I can hardly complain when my students don't!

In my experience, the worst places to teach tend to be fitness centres in government or big business complexes, as there is often no fresh air, lots of loud music, other members talking, coming and going, or using noisy fitness machines while you are trying to teach. It is very difficult to teach even the basics of qigong and walking the circle, let alone forms and partner work, in such a distracting environment.

In addition, many workers have good intentions about attending noon-hour or after-hours programs, but then soon discover that they must attend last-minute meetings, or work through lunch or late into the evening. Anything, like bagua forms, that must be learned sequentially, is very difficult to teach or learn when students miss a lot of classes. They quickly realise how hard it is to keep up if they miss class frequently and give up and drop out. Conversely, catering to them slows the learning and frustrates those who make the effort to come to class regularly.

Finally, if you try to get a study group going where you work but there is no fitness centre available there, it can be hard to schedule a suitable space for a bagua class. It is very distracting to do as I have done and hold your classes in the foyer of a large building (listening to vacuuming after hours is no fun) or in a boardroom full of furniture that has to be moved out of the way for each class and replaced when it is over!

Teaching in your home, if you have the space, is a very traditional way of giving lessons, and it used to be considered an honour to be invited to teacher's house for studies. If you have suitable free space, teaching at home is ideal for private classes, once you know the student, or perhaps for very small groups but rarely appropriate for large group classes or for attracting beginners who, rightly or wrongly, assume that someone competent will have a more commercial location. Also, you may find it impossible to teach the weapons forms from lack of space to swing the weapons freely. My wife used to take a very dim view of what my broadsword did to the ceiling of my training room while I was learning and teaching that weapon. Oh, and a broken table lamp is good for several hours of hot tongue and cold shoulder.

This also brings up practical issues, such as whether you live in an area that is zoned to allow such activities in a residence, as well as insurance liability for paying customers coming to your residence.

Teaching out of your home also makes it harder to attract female students who understandably may be reluctant to come to a man's residence and possibly be alone with a stranger. For a woman instructor, the danger is that some men will confuse what she is offering with what men often want from an unknown woman who invites them into her house.

Church halls or community centres are sometimes affordable and/or available on weekends free of charge if you are teaching on a not-for-profit basis. However, in the first case at

least, a surprising number of priests, ministers, mullahs and rabbis feel that their flock may be tainted spiritually by doing bagua because of its connection to Buddhism and Taoism. More than once over the years I have read articles by fundamental Christian and Muslims denouncing the practice of bagua, taiji, and qigong as being somehow the tools of Satan.

As to starting your own school from scratch, be prepared financially to live off your cash reserves (if you have any left after paying for premises and renovations) for at least one year. Taxes, advertising costs and office expenses will quickly demand that you either commercialise your teaching to ensure the numbers of students necessary to support such an establishment; or, as is often the case, you will have to rent out space at your school to those teaching other complimentary disciplines (yoga, dance, qigong, other martial arts) to supplement your income.

By the way, teaching endless groups of beginners or having to do endless private classes may result in you finding that you no longer have the enthusiasm for this art you once had, or you will burn out physically or emotionally from trying to earn a living. I am not trying to be discouraging, but you cannot appreciate being a teacher until you have done it with some dedication and suffered some of the arrows that come with trying to do so as a supplement to your income or as its sole source.

WHOM YOU TEACH

It is amazing how many people think that learning bagua or the internal martial arts of any kind is easy, and that they don't have to bring any physical abilities or enthusiasm to their classes in order to make progress. For example, I did a survey at the first introductory bagua group class I ever taught at a community centre, and only three of more then ten in attendance on the first night were used to regular physical activity or had ever seen bagua done at any level. Most did not know it was done quickly and was physically demanding. Not surprisingly, only four remained at the end of ten weeks, even though each class only lasted one hour, and there was only one class per week.

Martial arts documentaries on television or movie fantasies don't do bagua teachers any favours by showing elderly Chinese people practising bagua in the park, as the average viewer forgets that an elderly person makes it look easy because he or she has been doing it daily for years!

Conversely, I have also learned the hard way that it is more difficult than it seems to guess correctly which of the beginners will persevere, and improve, and continue their training. Sometimes it is not the one with lots of aptitude who seems so enthusiastic in the first few classes, but the slower, duller student who goes the distance and ends up learning something of real value.

Don't take it personally when people drop out or seem half-hearted. It will take you some time to develop your own rhythm and style as a teacher of this discipline. A few students along the way will blossom, and most will either coast or drop out. Studying bagua is not easy, and very few will bother to make the necessary effort or will find that they don't enjoy the training and will go elsewhere to find other disciplines that suit their physique and nature better. And that is okay too.

In some ways, teaching at noon-hour in a fitness centre is more likely to attract those used to regular exercise as well as those looking for stress reduction. However, it is very difficult to sell the value of standing still and circular movement to aerobics fanatic, weight lifters or modern hard style martial artists unless you can get them to give it a real try and convince them that bagua can be a useful supplement to other training—and not a replacement.

Conversely, you have to be careful and considerate of people with special physical needs, but mustn't cater to them so much that it is unfair to the others without such limitations. Qigong and the Chinese internal systems tend to attract people with severe problems of one sort or another, and many of them either want miracles from you or are unable to cope with the physical movements.

It is important to be honest and sometimes blunt with beginners—you are not a miracle or counselling service and, even for the simpler health-oriented methods, some people are not up to the challenge physically if they are badly out of shape or have acute or chronic medical conditions. It is worth repeating that you should steer the acutely ill to a competent Western or qigong doctor, rather than teach them methods that may worsen their lives.

Observers

Most people who watch a bagua class will know nothing or next to nothing about competency in it or the related internal disciplines. However, you will occasionally face hostile observers—particularly those who are adherents of other teachers, both good and bad. On several occasions such people have come and watched critically, asked pointed questions, made snide comments about what I was teaching, or have challenged me physically. On a good day you will just laugh them off, on a bad day.…

Some of the experienced practitioners you meet or who observe your class will be coldly polite, some aloof, some friendly. You have to play it by ear in your dealings with them. Let me add that one of my continuing disappointments with the experienced practitioners and teachers I meet is how arrogant they all seem to be about what they are doing. Having pride in what you practise or teach is one thing, but feeling that there is nothing of value elsewhere is another.

You must also come to terms with racism, as many Chinese instructors and would-be students will assume that you can not be any good just because you are not Chinese. Unfortunately, many non-Chinese will also make the same judgment. So, be prepared! I must admit that I can understand the thought processes behind this even though they are galling. As a French Canadian, if I took my son to a hockey school in which the coach was Chinese and could barely speak French or English, I might prejudge his ability to skate and play hockey, though I might well be wrong in that assumption.

By the way, in the old days it was common enough for teachers to send a senior student to test the waters with a new teacher in the area. This usually meant a subtle, or not so subtle, physical challenge to martial ability. This is much rarer than it used be, but still happens. Especially if you are advertising yourself as a martial arts instructor, you have to be ready to make some kind of demonstration of skill on occasion. It has happened to me three times in nineteen years of teaching and, win or lose, it is not a pleasant experience.

Speaking of such situations: years ago when I first started teaching bagua, I had a fellow who identified himself as a local black belt in karate call my school and ask if he could come to watch a class, as his Master also taught bagua and taiji. I said, "Sure!" And, as is often the case (another Babin's axiom), when his appointment rolled around, not one of my five students showed up that evening for class! So there I was, practising on my own when my visitor shows up with two young friends in tow—all three wearing their karate gi and black belts under their coats.

After introducing themselves they stood there glowering at me as I did the circular form and then asked to see some applications.… I had the sinking feeling that this was not heading in a friendly direction and decided to brass it out by inviting the one who had called me to hit me. I told him that I would block the attack in an bagua-like manner without retaliating so that he would give it his best in the assumption that I would be blocking in some way. He let it fly, and I did what Erle had done in my presence during his first workshop in Ottawa some years before (but not with the same authority) and let this man hit me in the unprotected torso. I smiled at the impact, and they all looked more than a little surprised.

After that demo, they were suddenly more friendly, which is what I had hoped, and asked to be led through some basics and the rest of the hour was pleasant enough. They never came back and I later found out that the fellow who had hit me was teaching what they called bagua at their local karate/martial arts school.

Frustrations & Rewards

Teaching can also be counterproductive if you lower your standards in order to make a larger profit. It is also true that in the beginning, many are driven to teach for all the wrong reasons and burn out as instructors, and often as practitioners. Others are seduced to the Dark Side (at the risk of sounding melodramatic) and end up teaching because of the financial rewards and ego gratification of playing the master.

Sadly, for your efforts, few in any group of students will bother to practise what little they learn—much less make the physical effort necessary to advance to the deeper aspects of the art, and even fewer will have any real aptitude or drive to excel.

On the other hand, it is also true that bagua can be many things to many people and that helping the out-of-shape to rediscover the pleasure and benefit of regular physical activity can bring almost as much satisfaction as teaching someone how to defend themselves against a variety of attacks.

There is quite a strong prejudice (in North America, anyway) against instructors who charge for their lessons. The sentiment seems to be that a good teacher will happily teach anyone who wants lessons for the pure joy of instruction. The taxman, landlord, and those who provide my Studio phone line have a different opinion—as does my wife—so I don't think that there is anything wrong with charging reasonable fees for your services.

Many students will not take you seriously unless they feel that they have to get their money's worth out of you. However, in some ways, it is easier to teach for the love of it, or to share what little you know if you can do it for free while earning your living in a 9–to–5 job.

Many commercially successful masters are abusing their students financially and earn a very good living while providing relatively little in return to them.

For example, some excellent teachers with thriving schools will become popular on the workshop trail—do a few, realise how much money is to be made, and go on the road many weekends or weeks per year. This can have unforeseen effects on family life—the divorce rate is high among martial arts teachers because of the long evening hours away from home and the temptations offered by groupies. This also tends to alienate the better students of the teacher's main school, as they feel abandoned and left to their own devices more and more frequently.

In some classes, it is very hard to be patient with the obvious lack of practice or having to correct the same mistakes in the same person for the hundredth time. There are other days when everything aches in my middle-aged carcass, and I think to myself, "Why am I doing this?" However, despite all these caveats, I do believe that teaching—whether it is on a one-to-one basis or in groups—is essential for a while in the same way that structure is essential, but in the end both may become limiting.

Ultimately, the only good reason to teach is to help you grow as a practitioner while helping your students find a path that can bring them better physical health and greater emotional and spiritual maturity. Which brings us to the next topic—martial virtue!

I will finish with the wisdom of an old-timer in the internal tradition that has remained with me since I first read it—how true it seemed to the spirit of teaching:

> I see myself as a guide. I am just a tool for my students to know how to teach and share the knowledge according to the student's specifications and abilities.… You can practise as a group, but the whole idea is very personal. Each student should move at this pace. This days (sic) many people think only about fighting. Fighting is something natural for the human being, and learning how to use your skills in combat is part of the traditional Kung-fu, but it is important that teacher also teaches how to avoid fighting. In a way, by learning how to fight we also learn the value of not fighting. Self-control is very important. I would strongly advise not to intellectualise the art. Kung-fu can be intellectualised, but the real practice is what is important. It takes more patience and hard work and less words. —Li Jian Yu, Secrets of Internal Kung-fu, May Issue, 2001.

Martial Virtue

Martial Ability *(Wu-gong)* refers to training and experience in external or internal martial arts; it implies a balanced approach to incorporating physical and energetic aspects to one's training. This is different from Martial Virtue *(Wu-de)*, which refers to a code of conduct that restrains and controls the practitioner when applying the martial abilities gained through training.

Nowadays, *Wu-de* is an often neglected aspect of modern classes in the internal arts although teachers often talk of using their qigong practice for a variety of spiritual and/or meditative purposes. However, little attention or class time is usually devoted to the day-to-day implications of these lofty aims—or, to put it bluntly, "talk is cheap." This is partly

practical from the perspective of the average teacher, as the kind of person who gravitates to the active life of martial training is often the least likely to want to stand or sit quietly.

It is also important to remember that the martial artist was the subject of hero worship in his homeland. There are many examples in Chinese popular fiction going back decades—even centuries—of Robin Hood type warrior ascetics whose kung-fu skills were as highly developed as their social conscience. It is another question how often the real experts lived up to this lofty ideal, in the same way that the average knight in the Middle Ages was as far as possible from the idealised nature of the Age of Chivalry.

Despite this, a substantial proportion of beginners have some expectation that their teacher will be like the venerable chief monk on the old kung-fu television series, and the classes and the training will be exotic and mysterious—and not just hard work with the occasional bruise or injury. Fortunately, this is largely irrelevant to whether or not there is a code of ethics in your own practice, and that of the teacher or style you follow. I feel that it is essential to instil values in your training that are worthy of inspection from the perspective of any good ethical system or religion.

May I suggest that the key concepts of martial ethics are Respect, Loyalty, Honesty, Humility and Integrity.

Respect is not easy to achieve or maintain and, on a core level, you must respect the art you want to learn as well as your teacher as a practitioner, as a teacher, and as a person. If you already feel that you know as much as him or her, it will be very difficult to understand the subtleties that often define the difference between a competent technician and a master practitioner.

We often become more like those we respect than we may be willing to acknowledge. You have to be careful that you don't copy the bad with the good over the months and years. On the other hand, if you cannot respect them as individuals, you can still learn a great deal.

You must also respect your training partners in class so that you approach each session as being a learning experience. It must have aspects of co-operation to be done safely and to the mutual benefit of all concerned. Martially, this is often difficult, as egos often come into play when people train together.

Sadly, many people who approach the martial arts initially do so out of fear, and their egos are tender in terms of "loss of face" or of appearing stupid. Sometimes a teacher must allow such students a little leeway at first or treat them harshly when they act out, to teach the valuable lesson. Respect is a two-way street and must be given as well as received.

You must also remember to respect those around you in your daily life and not abuse any martial skill that you do develop. It is particularly true for those younger men who approached the martial arts because they were fearful or had been victimised by bullies or criminals. It is easy to abuse your new-found health and martial abilities and become a little too much like those who may have picked on you before your training. With martial skill comes responsibility—both on an ethical and legal level.

Loyalty, in traditional view, to a Chinese martial arts teacher was expected to be unconditional, and the teacher literally assumed the role of an adoptive parent with the unques-

tioned obedience implied in their culture. Such a concept is hard for Westerners to digest and has largely disappeared from modern schools, but still can often be found in schools with an older Chinese teacher.

Loyalty is very much a double-edged sword in the sense that a practitioner is hardly liable to make the most of their training if they constantly hop from teacher to teacher, or if they feel no sense of connection to what is being taught and to the person teaching them.

However, it is equally true that a student must at the same time remain loyal to himself and to his family or society. Some unscrupulous teachers will not hesitate to exploit unquestioning obedience for financial, sexual, or egotistical reasons. It is a fine balancing act to remain loyal both to your own needs and to those of the person teaching you.

Oh, and you have to remember to remain loyal to your family and friends as well and not ignore their complaints: "You are always away at class!" or "Do you have to train now, we have to take the kids out!" or "That workshop clashes with the holiday we talked about taking in the summer." Compromise and negotiation are difficult skills to learn, but are essential aspects of being mature—no matter what your biological age—and, if you think about it, essential aspects of developing self-defence skills. Physical conflict should be a viable last resort and not your first choice in settling disputes.

Honesty is an elusive quality in modern life and seems to have gone out of fashion in many ways. It should not be confused with the media obsession of speaking out on every personal subject and former taboo in the name of being open.

The teacher must be honest with the student, and the student must be honest with his or her teacher and, perhaps the hardest of all, with him or herself! On a simple level this can extend to the most mundane details. For example, when I went to Boulder, Colorado in the mid-90s to be in Erle Montaigue's video on *Dim-mak* for Paladin Press, the editor we were dealing with mentioned over breakfast one morning that not one of their popular authors of self-defence texts with Chinese names was actually Asian. Strange how many North American kung-fu types insist on being called by an Oriental name or title, despite being born white or black.

On the other hand, good white practitioners will often get bestowed a Chinese name by their Chinese teachers, partly as a mark of distinction and partly because it will be easier for the Chinese to say than the original name. However, this is different from conferring a Chinese name on yourself to sound more authentic.

As a student, you need to identify what you want from your training, reconcile those needs with what you can realistically achieve through your training, and communicate those expectations to your teacher. The average student may be taking classes because they need to fill a void in their social life; they may want to learn something supposedly good for the health that they imagine doesn't take much effort; they may be looking for martial and/or performance skills, and they may be there because the school is convenient to their home or office or affordable. Only you can know what you want from your training, and what you are willing to sacrifice in order to make progress.

It is also important to realise that the teacher may have as much trouble as you do identifying what he or she wants from being an instructor. Some do so for the money to be made

from teaching commercially, some from a desire to be in the spotlight, some teach from a genuine need to share whatever skills they may have, and some just like to be in charge. These are all normal motives for teaching. As long as the teacher is honest with the student, and vice versa, and both are getting something from the relationship, neither should have any real reason to complain.

Humility is only problematic if you don't have any. You are not likely to learn anything if you already feel that you know it all. In particular, those students who already have some skills may well concentrate on trying to find the similarities between what they already think they know and with what they are presently studying.

As I have said before, in understanding a new method or style it is often more productive to try and identify how is is different, rather than how it is similar to what you have done before.

It is perhaps even more important for the teacher to remain humble despite his or her technical skills and experience. I remember my elderly mother watching a video of a martial arts show where I and some of my students had demonstrated bagua in the mid-90s. Her comment was, "Why are you going in circles? That looks stupid!" Beauty truly is in the eyes of the beholder. It is hard not to keep some perspective on your skills and the relative value of your training when you are periodically reminded that the sun doesn't shine out of your nether regions. Perhaps, the loss of this kind of innocence is what keeps most instructors from fulfilling their real potentials as human being and as instructors. It is very difficult to become an expert if you already feel that there is little more that you can learn from anyone else!

Integrity is something that has largely gone out of style in modern society, and most people will no longer value the rare examples still to be found. For example, you find a wallet with a great deal of cash and go to the effort of returning it to the owner. Your friends or family will look at you incredulously because you didn't accept a reward for its return, and more than a few will think you are stupid for having returned it at all. Morality has no value in a consumer society whose heroes are large corporations or financial institutions who seem to function on socially dubious or fraudulent practices.

This is not to say that you should try to become some perfect or mythic figure, but just stay true to whatever value system your parents raised you with. And if they didn't, it is never too late to learn. Start with "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This excellent advice occurs in every major religion I have studied, and the wording is often very similar. Human nature is human nature.

Oh, and in the long run, those who choose to teach baguazhang (or any martial art) have a greater burden than those who are content to follow. Ideally, teaching should benefit the students on many levels—each according to his or her capacity and needs—and not just stroke the ego of the teacher or fill his pockets with money.

Although it has nothing to do with martial training (or does it?), I also like the advice the Dalai Lama gave in his speech on the subject of the millennium in the year 2000: "Follow the three R's: Respect for self, respect for others, responsibility for all your actions." Good advice for people in general, and martial artists in particular!

Conclusion

The longer I teach, the more I understand why the best teachers currently, and probably in the past, teach only privately or in small groups and don't try to make a lot of money teaching such classes. Perhaps, it is because in the traditional approach classes were held informally in the parks or temples, and students paid by their loyalty and effort more than in cash or kind. Certainly, the longer I teach, the more mixed feelings I have about being a bagua instructor.

As I mentioned before, teaching is a necessary evil; however, it is equally true that teaching can be a noticeable drag on your personal time and energy, and you may eventually have to consider taking a sabbatical from teaching group classes to focus on your own training and working with one or two students as training partners for the martial methods.

Learning to be a good teacher of bagua is like anything else in life: you have to be patient, within reason, with people's foibles and teach them to the best of your ability all the time.

Getting back momentarily to humility, it is also important to remember that being a great martial artist is not worth a pinch of poop in the grand scheme of things, and that few people will really care or remember your sterling qualities as a teacher or a person when you are gone. If those were the only reasons to practise and teach bagua, there would be even fewer practitioners around than there are!

Final Words

Life is too short to spend time and effort training in something that is not as functional as it was designed to be. I have always preferred to study martial arts that have "usefulness." However, it is also true that you can practise bagua circle walking for health purposes on many levels. In fact, some martial historians link the origins of circular patterns in this art to religious and meditative practices that are still used by some Taoist religious sects.

In recent years, the traditional Christian religious practice of "walking the maze" while praying has become popular again, and even the most cynical might see the common thread in entering meditative state by walking the maze or walking the circle. It is also tempting, when watching a demonstration of the meditative circling dances of the Sufi Muslims, called rather crassly whirling dervishes by the popular Western media, to see the common ground that unites any of these practices on a meditative and spiritual level.

Sadly, most modern bagua stylists I have met wouldn't have much hope using their art for self-defence against a determined aggressor, much less against one who also had some technical skills in fighting. The other side of the dilemma is that too much fighting is hard on the body past a certain age and not necessarily good for the soul.

So what is the answer? I could suggest that one answer is looking for a balanced approach to your training. Finding an approach that honestly suits your individual needs is another. But, unfortunately, there is no formula that will make everyone happy.

In any case, if you cannot find a good bagua teacher whose classes you can attend regularly, or if you have tried self-instruction from videos and it has not worked for you, then you are probably better off studying with a live teacher in any good martial discipline you can find and practising circle walking as a moving qigong.

I might also suggest, to further confuse the issue, that it is very difficult to do circle walking well on any level unless you have had well-rounded instruction from a qualified expert. Persevering in the study of bagua, or any aspect of that discipline, is very much a microcosm of life. And, as in life, there are rarely any easy answers or short cuts that are worth taking.

Thank you for having read through this little book. I trust that at least some of what you have read will be useful to your training. You don't have to agree with or understand everything I wrote, but thinking about the subject in a critical manner is essential for maximizing the physical aspect of your practice on any level.

Good luck with your training and with life. Neither are easy, and both are worth pouring your heart and soul into!

About the Author

I began studying Japanese and Chinese hard martial styles in the early 1970s and started learning Yang Style Taijiquan in 1975 with a succession of local instructors. By 1980, I was sure I knew it all. Then I met Allan Weiss, a student of the late Lee Shiu Pak, and he very kindly shattered all illusions I had about both my level of understanding of Yang Style Taijiquan and my martial expertise. After five years of teaching, he certified me as an instructor in 1985.

For the next few years, I taught my own taiji classes, wrote articles for the martial arts and taiji magazines (including *Tongren, Canadian Martial Arts, Combat & Healing, Inside Kung Fu, T'ai Chi, Australasian Fighting Arts, Black Belt, Karate/Kung Fu Illustrated,* and *Official Karate*), and attended workshops and training camps given by such experts as the late Eric Chew, Sam Masich, Yang Ywing Ming, Liang Shouyu, Eric Tuttle, William C.C. Chen, and Carol Mancuso.

Each one in their own way helped me realise that I still didn't know as much as I had hoped and assumed. In particular, I had been corresponding with Erle Montaigue for some time and invited him in 1990 to do a workshop in Ottawa during his first tour of North America. As a result of that experience, I decided to abandon almost everything I had been practising and teaching to start anew from his videos and workshops on both Taijiquan and Baguazhang.

Erle certified me as competent to teach his approach to Baguazhang in 1994, and since then I have taught classes in that art. Many years later, I still don't have any answers; but, thanks to Erle and the other bagua instructors who have influenced me along the way, a few of the questions are starting to make sense.

This is my first offering on this discipline although I have written or co-written three published books. Both taiji texts were published by Paladin Press in the mid-1990s. One of these, *Power Taiji,* co-authored with Erle Montaigue, is still in print and available for sale at http://www.paladin-press.com.